



American Political Thought



6th EDITION



EDITORS

Kenneth M. Dolbeare | Michael S. Cummings

American Political Thought

SIXTH EDITION

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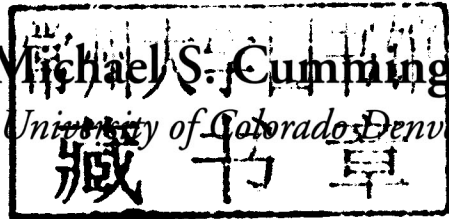
Kenneth M. Dolbeare

The Evergreen State College, Emeritus

and

Michael S. Cummings

University of Colorado Denver



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*This book is dedicated to our students,
who keep on helping us ask the right questions,
and to engaged citizens everywhere,
upon whom the public good most vitally depends.*

Preface

THIS BOOK is intended for college and university audiences, usually but not exclusively students in the American political thought courses taught in political science departments. As political scientists, we—the book's editors—have taught American political thought more times than we care to count, but always with a special satisfaction. We learn something new every time, and we enjoy watching students critically evaluate their heritage—and themselves.

American political thought courses are unusual in the political science curriculum in that they respond to changing circumstances and students, rather than remaining fixed in terms of content and expectations. Happily, nobody has succeeded in imposing a cookie-cutter character on what simply must be covered in a course in American political thought. Often the course becomes an arena within which students can try out various thinkers and ideas and seek through questioning, provocation, and relentless trial and error to define themselves politically in an evolving United States. As editors, we have provided a broad spectrum of thinkers and excerpts of adequate length and challenge to enable students to develop and apply analytic skills and gain new understanding of their country.

The changed circumstances for this sixth edition of a book first published in 1969 are far more dramatic than at any other occasion of a new edition. As the Introduction to Part VII spells out in greater length, our times are genuinely unprecedented, and we have had to exercise serious self-discipline to maintain historical perspective throughout the preparation of this sixth edition—particularly in the more recent sections. So much has happened in the past few years, and yet our Republic has endured great crises before and probably will again. Perhaps it will be best to simply state what is new in this edition and leave the rest to history.

About one-third of the selections in this edition are new. There is substantial continuity in the materials prior to the post-World War II period, as might be expected, but even here new materials have been added and out-of-date selections have been dropped. In some cases, history has not been kind to certain authors and thinkers, and others present new perspectives for important strands of thought. We have tried, however, to rebuild without losing sight of the great themes of American political thought so that new and contemporary materials find their proper places in the evolution of American ideas.

It should be no surprise that the entirely new Part VII has been added to account for what may be recognized as an enabling crisis bringing about new directions in American political thought. This new part retains our usual balance of sources on the political left and right, even though the part is weighted toward the prime mover of American

politics, the president of the United States. From no other source—under the circumstances of our times—can we anticipate similar initiative or sense of purpose and direction. For better or

worse, the president's words and actions will shape the immediate future of American political thought. We leave to the seventh edition the critical evaluation of his performance.

Introduction

American Political Thought

THE ELECTION OF BARACK OBAMA in 2008 as the first African American president of the United States dramatically highlights many key themes in the history of American political thought. The 2008 election also challenges readers of this book to take on new responsibilities as citizens of a country facing numerous crises: economic recession, multiple foreign wars, and global climate change, among others. The ways in which the Obama administration has responded to these challenges and Americans are responding to a new call to public service can frame readers' responses to this edition's selection of readings, including some of Obama's most important speeches.

Key Themes in the History of American Political Thought

Voting demographics from the 2008 election highlight the cleavages in our **democratic system of majority rule**, a persistent theme and controversial topic for American political thinkers going back to the Iroquois, the Founders, and especially American revolutionaries such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson. If the election of 2008 had been left up to white people alone, only 43 percent of whom voted for Democrat Barack Obama, then Republican John McCain would have become our 44th president. Likewise, men as a group would have elected McCain, as would voters 35 years of age and older. Despite Obama's "elite" advantage among the most educated voters, McCain would also have prevailed had only the wealthier half of Americans been permitted to vote.

In other words, under the unequal voting rules prevailing during much of our history—disenfranchising nonwhites, poor people, women, and millions of the youngest voters—Obama would have been solidly defeated. Or restated, Obama was elected because he won the votes of women, people of color, the economically disadvantaged, and the young. The theme of **equality** and historical struggles against inequality inspired many of the writers represented in this book. But despite two centuries of progress toward greater equality in the United States, do these stark demographic contrasts mean that Americans remain profoundly divided at a time of crisis when they most need to be united?

President Obama himself would reject this divisive view of the 2008 election. Beginning with his early campaigns for public office in Illinois in the 1990s, Obama has consistently urged Americans to overcome their divisions and work together for the **common good**, a concept whose definition has been a controversial but persistent theme in the history of American political thought. "On this day," the new president said on January 20, 2009, "we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord." In fact, readers should note *how large Obama's various margins of support actually were among the groups that on balance favored his*

opponent. For instance, Obama's 43 percent support among white voters was greater than the percentage of white support for white Democratic candidates John Kerry in 2004 or Al Gore in 2000—a surprising fact that suggests that the old American story of **racial division and conflict** may be nearing an all-time historical low in a country whose centuries of racial strife define many heated debates among our political thinkers.

During the 2008 campaign, conservative opponents labeled Obama as the most liberal member of the U.S. Senate, based on his voting record since 2006. Despite the negative connotation U.S. conservatives attached to the term “liberal” during the “Triumph of Neoconservatism” period of 1980–2006, **liberalism**, in one guise or another, has typically served as the philosophical umbrella for most American political thinkers. This liberal tradition dates to our Lockean Founders, who were inspired by the seventeenth-century English theorist John Locke's advocacy of “life, liberty, and property.” With its emphasis on individual liberty, competition, and the acquisition of wealth, liberalism has always challenged **community**, a theme addressed by President Obama in his inaugural speech. Faced with unprecedented national challenges, he argued, we fellow Americans must work together for common purposes; we must be as concerned about our shared responsibilities as about our individual rights and personal desires. This striving for community, stressed by several influential American thinkers, has historically presented a countervailing argument against the excesses of the American love of individual freedoms and pursuit of self-advancement.

Freedom itself became a battle cry of American thinkers and activists in two distinct and formative periods: the *revolutionary period*, when the American colonists successfully challenged what they viewed as the tyranny of British colonialism, and the *abolitionist movement* in the decades leading up to the Civil War,

which finally freed African Americans from the tyranny of enslavement. Legal freedom, however, did not mean full equality for freed slaves and their descendants, as President Obama acknowledged in his inaugural speech when he described himself as “a man whose father less than sixty years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant” but who “can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath.”

Freedom alone did not mean equality for African Americans or for Native Americans, whom the European settlers had displaced from their ancestral lands. Nor did freedom necessarily mean **justice**, a passionately debated topic among prominent American political thinkers of the past four centuries. Disagreements about justice, which typically specifies some proper balance between freedom and equality, date back 2,500 years to the Greek philosophers Socrates, his student Plato, Plato's student Aristotle, and the Roman jurist Cicero, all of whom influenced our own Founders.

Despite our nation's relative youth, its traditions hold great sway with most American thinkers and politicians, including President Obama. In arguing against the illegal use of torture, even in the case of suspected terrorists, Obama's inaugural address warned: “As for our common defense, we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals. Our Founding Fathers, faced with perils we can scarcely imagine, drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man.” This **rule of law** has defined the American republic and distinguished it from dictatorships based upon the unchecked rule of leaders.

As movements for the enfranchisement of African Americans and women confronted the rule of *unjust* laws, advocates of **civil disobedience** have tried to persuade Americans that laws, while essential, are also imperfect and must be challenged. Barack Obama has acknowledged some “disobedient” predecessors: the Founders, who risked their lives as “terrorists” to oust the British and create our nation; Abraham Lincoln,

who skirted some laws and abolished unjust laws of slavery and disenfranchisement; Henry David Thoreau, who went to jail in the cause of ending an unjust war; and Martin Luther King Jr., who both went to jail and gave his life for the cause of racial equality. Obama has written about the tension between the necessary respect for systems of law and for conscientious dissent from—or even breaking of—specific laws that are argued to be unjust by reference to a higher, or *natural* law.

American political thinking has evolved along with economic growth and a changing U.S. government, both shaping and being shaped by the increasing size, reach, power, and importance of the federal government. Readers will encounter much debate in the history of American political thought over whether a minimal government of last resort is preferable to a larger, more vigorous government. However, the current economic crisis may have rendered this debate moot: “The question we ask today,” President Obama pronounced at his inauguration, “is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works.” This kind of **pragmatism**, if not uniquely American, is especially characteristic of American attitudes and behavior. Tradition is well and good, Americans seem to think, and they have a genuine streak of **conservatism** based on their patriotic attachment to U.S. institutions. But most Americans would agree that if something long-practiced no longer works, then let’s try something better. A liberal and practical reformism is the classic American response to most social problems.

In the American liberal tradition, trying something better usually means exploratory and creative experimenting, pursuing a series of incremental changes: for instance, taking 150 years to extend the right to vote, group by group, to all adult citizens; responding to often turbulent labor unionism and strife by enacting laws improving working conditions bit by bit, over many decades; or responding over the

past half century to dramatic new scientific evidence pointing toward the need for regulatory laws to protect public health and the natural environment.

However, on occasion Americans have rallied for fundamental change, starting with the War of Independence against British colonialism. As Barack Obama was becoming our 44th president, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman wrote an op-ed piece entitled “A Radical in the White House.” **Radicalism** has always been a part of the American political tradition, especially in times of crisis. Friedman argued that 2009 was the historic moment for a radical president—not a left-wing or right-wing radical, he cautioned—but *one who will get to the root of our problems* and propose the bold and transformative initiatives that our multiple economic, international, and ecological challenges urgently require.

In hoping to inspire Americans with his summons for “change we can believe in,” President Obama returned to a very traditional yet still radical American idea, often associated with Thomas Jefferson: namely, that ordinary citizens should empower themselves to engage actively in the political process. In 2009, however, Obama drew also on the need for a vigorous and expansive national government, an idea associated with Alexander Hamilton, a sometime friend and frequent foe of Jefferson. Jefferson, the primary author of the Declaration of Independence, believed that humankind’s main hope against political oppression, corruption, and decay lay in an actively engaged and enlightened citizenry. Hamilton felt that fickle humans required strong guidance from enlightened political leaders.

Faced with the multiple crises of 2009, President Obama called for the most expensive new governmental programs in U.S. history, but he also called on all Americans to partner actively with their government. For our problems, he blamed not only “the greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our

collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age.” We must change our soft, consumerist ways, he implied, leaving no doubt that government alone cannot save the republic: “As much as government can do and must do,” he proclaimed, “it is ultimately the faith and determination of the American people upon which this nation relies.” In a message of tough love, the president told Americans that they needed to rise to the challenge of these dangerous times. Historically, economic crises have become the breeding ground not only of liberating revolutions but also of authoritarian movements and tyrannical regimes.

In responding to our president’s continuing call to action, what resources might Americans, including this book’s readers, discover or recover from the ideas and insights of our most original and influential political thinkers? What are the prospects for a twenty-first-century version of Jeffersonian democracy? Will Jeffersonian or libertarian fears of big government undermine Obama’s vision of massive public initiative and increased governmental regulation? In Abraham Lincoln’s reformulation of Jefferson’s vision, how can Americans of today ensure that “government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth”?

The New American Crisis: Can Americans Forge a New Reality of Public and Private Democratic Engagement?

In *The American Crisis* (1777), American revolutionary Thomas Paine wrote: “These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country, but he that stands it *now* deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.” Present-day Americans don’t realize how easily our revolution could have failed and how likely our Founders could have been hanged as traitors, becoming martyrs for a lost

cause. When Benjamin Franklin warned that “we must hang together, or we will surely hang separately,” he was speaking literally. In the darkest hour of the colonists’ struggle against the British, Gen. George Washington ordered Paine’s words to be read to his desperate troops.

At his inauguration, President Obama recalled that bleak time: “In the year of America’s birth, in the coldest of months, a small band of patriots huddled by dying campfires on the shores of an icy river. The capital was abandoned. The enemy was advancing, the snow was stained with blood. At a moment when our revolution was most in doubt, the father of our nation ordered these words be read to the people: ‘Let it be told to the future world . . . that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive . . . that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet [it].’”

The president ended his speech with an urgent appeal to all Americans: “America. In the face of our common dangers, in this winter of our hardship, let us remember these timeless words. With hope and virtue, let us brave once more the icy currents and endure what storms may come. Let it be said by our children’s children that when we were tested, we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter, and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God’s grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations.”

As political scientist Robert Dahl pointed out a half century ago, two strains of American democratic thought and practice have vied for primacy from the beginning of our republic. *Madisonian democracy*, named after its principal architect, James Madison, has used governmental checks and balances to prevent tyranny. A more radical alternative, *populistic democracy*, has challenged the elite-oriented Madisonian system with appeals to political equality and mass-majority rule. Each approach ebbs and flows, shaping law and policy, but the long-term

winner so far has been the Madisonian system. Our separation and division of powers has, thus far, prevented any leader or interest group from tyrannizing over the rest of the polity. Notably, it has prevented a majority faction—Madison's greatest fear—from exercising excessive power “of the people, for the people, by the people.”

Our Madisonian system of checks and balances—among the three branches of government and between the different levels of government—has proved adept at preventing enactment of bad policies that would allow the government to oppress the people. But checks and balances can also prevent *good* policy, even vital policies, from occurring. The crises facing President Obama, Congress, and the American people in 2009 may have presented an opportunity for a new populist challenge to democratic elitism and to the dominance of Wall Street bankers, corporate CEOs, political party insiders, and other powerful organized interests. Formerly marginalized groups that played such an important role in Obama's historic election—people of color, women, youth, and the poor—may now be claiming a new authority to recalibrate U.S. public priorities on such issues as health care, education, children's needs, and aid to the disadvantaged.

In addition, the recent scientific consensus on global warming has catapulted climate change to the center of public-policy debates about the costs of unregulated growth and the need for public regulation of the economy. Citizens' groups across the country are calling for increased national investment in crumbling or lagging U.S. infrastructure: roads, bridges, dikes, waterways, energy-transmission lines, and communication networks.

The most recent generation has witnessed the rise of *social entrepreneurs*, nonprofit organizations working outside of corporate and governmental structures to apply business principles of supply and demand, marketing, and incentives to a different kind of bottom line: not profit but rather social change in

education, poverty, disease, ecology, social violence, and family breakdown. President Obama gained political experience in this sector when he worked as a community organizer in the blighted neighborhoods of Chicago's South Side. An example of highly successful social entrepreneurship is the Ashoka Foundation, founded thirty years ago by Ivy Leaguer Bill Drayton after working in corporate America and for the federal Environmental Protection Agency. Drayton had been frustrated by corporate profiteering and government bureaucracy, so he created a third sector promoting social change for the common good.

In *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas*, researcher David Bornstein documents successful programs of social entrepreneurship in the United States and around the world. Along with many other, similar programs, the hundreds of Ashoka-funded organizations provide ordinary Americans with the community-service opportunities that President Obama has urged them to pursue. Such citizen engagement can complement traditional contributions in the areas of for-profit business, political activism, and governmental service.

In the early nineteenth century, French observer Alexis de Tocqueville reported on the widespread and vibrant social “associations” active all across the young and increasingly democratic United States. An aristocrat, he was both impressed and worried by the energy and activity of America's ordinary citizens. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, a related phenomenon of “voluntary tribes” fills the void left by growing anonymity in modern U.S. neighborhoods and the waning of traditional ethnic, religious, and geographical identities. To rebuild a sense of community, groups of otherwise unrelated citizens are coming together, meeting regularly, creating their own rituals, and carrying out projects for a wide variety of purposes: from supporting a local athletic team such as the 2009 Super Bowl champion Pittsburgh

Steelers (“Steeler Nation”) to breast cancer initiatives and political crusades.

“In politics, the Obama campaign is the epitome of the voluntary tribe,” wrote *Newsweek* journalist Howard Fineman. “Traditional parties once generated deep, tribelike emotion, but they tended to be assemblages based on race, ethnicity and region. Obama’s tribe, by contrast, was founded on ideas—ending a war, changing the ways of Washington.” Obama’s campaign combined Internet tribalism, including unprecedented fundraising, with diverse face-to-face meetings, culminating in the D.C. “Neighborhood Ball” attended by President and Mrs. Obama on inauguration night. Taking a page out of the inaugural speech’s gritty tone, Fineman concluded that it won’t be easy to maintain this new tribal fervor: “In football, all you have to do is win the next game. In the presidency, you have to save the world.”¹

At the beginning of his presidency, Barack Obama knew that he would need help—that the old ways of Washington and Wall Street had seriously damaged Main Street—but that he and his administration could not repair the damage without active commitment from the people. Obama stressed that traditional American values—those that have inspired many of the authors whose selections appear in this book—must once again spur citizens to create the change we need: “hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism.” He added, “[T]hese things are old. These things are true.” This reputedly “most liberal” or even “radical” president hoped to unite left and right, Democrats and Republicans, progressives and traditionalists, black and white, indeed all Americans, in a joint and sustained public-private campaign to confront “the gathering clouds” and “raging storms” of our times.

1. Howard Fineman, “Our New Tribes,” *Newsweek: Special Inauguration Issue*, January 26, 2009, 61.

Key Concepts in American Political Thought

Ideologically, where do President Obama, his Democratic Party, opposition Republicans, and, indeed, the readers of this book stand in the context of four centuries of American political thought? What key concepts of political philosophy would help us answer this question? This section takes a broad overview of the main competing American ideologies and the bases on which they have been built.

Assumptions about *the nature of human beings* and about *the purposes of social life* are fundamental building blocks of political thinking. If people are assumed to be naturally good, intelligent, reasonable, and mutually concerned with one another’s well-being and development, then a community of equals with a minimum of coercion will be possible and desirable. Certain radicals, including *anarchists*, think this is the case. Radicals seek fundamental change at the root of society’s problems, which, for anarchists, means eliminating the coercive state.

If people are assumed to be self-interested and acquisitive by nature, however, ways will have to be found to harness their rational but competitive striving to provide for the general good and achieve a balance between private and public interests. *Liberals* think they have found such ways. And if people are assumed to be more self-indulgent and emotional than rational, there must be some means of causing them to be guided by the few who possess wisdom and talent so that the needs of the society as a whole can be served instead. Conservatives advocate such means.

In each case, assumptions about human nature merge with a related purpose of the social order to form the core of a well-known system of political thought. Some of these assumptions and goals find expression as *political values*, the next building blocks of political thinking. In the case of liberalism—the system of thought that has dominated the American tradition—key values

include individualism, natural rights (among which property rights have been paramount), freedom, and equality. Each of these values generates powerful loyalties and may be viewed as inevitable or beyond question.

Anarchists and organic conservatives hold sharply contrasting values, but both have found it very difficult to be heard in the marketplace of ideas. Instead, most of the arguments at various periods in American history have been over how to define and rank basic liberal values. For instance, as equality rose in importance compared to freedom and property, poor white males, followed by blacks, and then women won the right to vote. Along with the extension of the franchise came additional egalitarian measures, including a progressive income tax and economic programs to help the needy. But neither freedom nor any other essential liberal value has been rejected.

Let us now review the main contenders in the American political tradition.

LIBERALISM

Most Americans' political beliefs fall along a continuum ranging from liberalism to conservatism, based on whether the thinker generally prefers change or the status quo. From the beginning, however, Americans have also had a more specific conception of liberalism, that is, *classical liberalism*, as their dominant system of thought: society is composed of separate individuals, who are rational, self-interested, and entitled by nature to certain rights such as life, liberty, and property. Governments of limited powers are created out of contracts among such individuals to safeguard these inalienable rights and maintain order. Rights, contracts, and limits to government all suggest a major role for law in organizing society. An important unstated assumption of liberalism is that private efforts to fulfill needs and desires provide the best means—the least coercive and most

related to talent and effort—of distributing economic and other social rewards.

With roots in earlier European thought, liberalism rose to prominence in the American colonies in the eighteenth century, appealing especially to the growing middle class of artisans, merchants, financiers, and other small entrepreneurs. In Europe the liberal system of thought defended the prerogatives and property of this rising middle class against potential incursions from the upper-class landowning aristocrats and from the redistributing claims of the peasants and proletariat. In the United States, without the feudal holdovers of a powerful aristocracy or a deprived peasantry of former serfs, middle-class liberalism reigned virtually unchallenged.

As Louis Hartz² and others have argued, this lack of any effective challenge to liberalism has constricted American political discourse within bounds that seem quite narrow to Europeans and other non-Americans. Arguments among twenty-first-century American “liberals” and “conservatives,” Democrats and Republicans, occur almost exclusively within the bounds of classical liberalism. Other non-liberal alternatives, such as organic conservatism on the right and anarchism on the left, have been largely ignored or repressed as “un-American.” That the term *liberalism* today encompasses both “propertarian” Republicans and “humanitarian” Democrats may become clearer when, by contrast, we consider the modern organic conservatism of the past two centuries inspired by English philosopher Edmund Burke and modified by historian Clinton Rossiter³ and others.

CONSERVATISM

Organic conservatism begins from quite a different focus, leading to a different view of the relationship between people and their governments.

2. *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955).

3. *Conservatism in America* (New York: Random House, 1955, 1962).

Classical, or organic, conservatism posits that society comes first—that it exists apart from the individuals who happen to make it up at any particular time. This independent entity is a continuing organism with a life of its own, progressing through centuries. The individuals populating a society are but transients, changing from day to day as deaths and births take place. People have no claims prior to those of society except those that society gives them in furthering its own needs. Because people are emotional and frequently irrational, they need order; responsible liberty is the product of an ordered society that enables people to use their liberty to do what is right, not what their whims or impulses might dictate.

Conservatism does not deny the inevitability of change; indeed, its founder Edmund Burke was himself a reformer. But conservatives do not support change for its own sake. The kind of change that is appropriate is what society is ready for and what fits its established traditions. Society is a historical partnership linking the dead, the living, and the not-yet-born. As “the democracy of the dead,” tradition embodies the wisdom of generations. Government, in this design, cannot be either the creature or the servant of the people who happen to make up the society at any given moment, for it is the agent of the past and future society.

Further, because of the inherent inequality in distribution of talents, some people are better qualified than others to decide what governmental policies should be. Therefore, either the franchise should be limited or other means should be devised to ensure that people of talent predominate. Both political equality and majority rule are therefore considered illusory or undesirable. Only those with the requisite talent should decide what government must do on behalf of the society, and individuals’ lives are directed accordingly. With the help of its government, the societal organism improves the culture, enhances collective attainments, and increases individual satisfaction.

Given the conservative view of human nature as undisciplined and irrational, this directive paternalism is the only way that life’s amenities can be broadly realized.

The inequalities embraced by organic conservatism have commonly been based not only on differences in individual virtue or talent but also on nationality, race, gender, socioeconomic class, and age. Readers may be confused by the twenty-first-century American “conservatives” who reject these categories of discrimination and embrace equal opportunity for all. But these more recent defenders of the status quo have evolved out of dominant liberalism, during which incremental reforms have gradually democratized society while leaving the regime of private property and economic inequality largely intact.

Today’s self-styled conservatives have given up on certain forms of inequality that were embraced by their predecessors, and they have become more suspicious of government as well, partly because the extension of the franchise to all adults has made elected government a less consistent defender of privileged elites and the socioeconomic status quo. Yet most conservatives continue to support a strong governmental role in crime control, national defense, and regulation of the private lives of Americans in such areas as sex, drugs, abortion, school prayer, and protection of the flag. Today’s conservatives have also embraced a dynamic economic system, capitalism, whose growth-is-good orientation has transformed such traditional institutions as church and family in unintended and sometimes troubling ways.

Despite the dominance of liberalism in the history of American political thought and practice, both organic conservatives and radicals have influenced the margins of political change. They have occasionally succeeded in extracting concessions from the liberal establishment, as when Southern conservatives succeeded in restoring de jure racial inequality in the South for almost a century after the Civil War and when socialist

ideas of the early twentieth century were co-opted by both Democrats and Republicans during and after the New Deal. As important as these past influences is the possibility that in a dynamic and increasingly pluralistic system such as the American one, either conservative or radical alternatives to liberalism may further expand political debate and future alternatives.

RADICALISM

On the opposite side of liberalism from conservatism runs a small but frequently freshening stream of radicalism. Because American liberalism did not start out democratic—most citizens were prevented from voting—radical challenges have been required to democratize liberalism. For instance, in the early nineteenth century, the “extremist” radical abolitionists, such as William Lloyd Garrison and the Grimke sisters, challenged slavery and the disenfranchisement of African Americans. A subsequent, twentieth-century example is the series of major changes, initially demanded by socialists, to improve the status of the working class, such as higher wages, a shorter work week, improved working conditions, and the right to organize labor unions to promote the general cause of workers. Because many Americans frequently forget or ignore their history, these important radical contributions are often overlooked.

Perhaps the best reflection of radicalism’s long-term contributions to American politics is the incorporation of many planks from the campaign platforms of the radical Socialist and Populist Parties of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into the platforms of the mainstream Democrats and the Republicans, including workers’ right to strike, unemployment compensation, Social Security, the progressive income tax, and redistributional policies benefiting the disadvantaged. To accomplish these reforms, radicals have, in effect, joined forces with, reformed, and thus strengthened liberalism.

Yet the radical tradition in American politics continues. For radicals, true democracy requires even greater equality than has been achieved, especially in social and economic matters as well as through the fuller and more meaningful participation of ordinary citizens in public affairs. Radicals continue to try to overcome the notorious “apathy”—or more accurately a *sense of powerlessness*—of most Americans, only half of whom vote, even in presidential elections. Radicals also spawned the environmental movement of the late twentieth century; indeed, their success can be measured by the ever increasing majority of Americans who now identify themselves as pro-environment. Once again, the two major parties have been forced to change by a movement inspired by such visionary pioneers as forester Aldo Leopold and scientist Rachel Carson, but at the same time, environmental radicals have been co-opted, or we might say “liberalized,” in the process. A case in point is the strong position on mitigating climate change and promoting alternative energy sources taken in 2009 by the incoming Obama administration.

The economic crisis of 2008–2009 created a new opportunity for radicals who have long argued for a drastic reconstruction of the U.S. economy in the direction of stable jobs paying a living wage, vigorous public regulation of Wall Street and large corporations, independence from foreign oil, and ecological sustainability. Called “radical” by some for moving quickly on these issues, President Obama is more accurately described as a liberal willing to look at some radical ideas when faced with unprecedented economic and foreign policy crises. The president has also acknowledged that he cannot entirely ignore conservative ideas if he wants to gain bipartisan support and legitimacy for his new programs.

In Conclusion

For two centuries, liberalism has remained the dominant American political ideology, in part

by adjusting its emphasis on personal versus property rights, and in part by selectively incorporating persuasive arguments made by conservatives and radicals. In a nod to conservatism, liberals have enacted policies to prevent any major upheaval in the social and economic status quo and promote patriotic allegiance to American traditions. In response to radical movements, liberals have humanized capitalism by softening the winner-loser struggle of the market through public help for the poor and disadvantaged. By their willingness to regulate and nurture a growing and

ever-more-complex economy, liberals have essentially protected the political economy of U.S. democratic capitalism from excesses that might have bred serious left- or right-wing challenges of the sort that devastated Russia and Germany in the twentieth century.

As editors of the sixth edition of *American Political Thought*, we hope that the readings we offer will give you new insights into formative American political thinkers of the past and help you decide how you want to respond, personally and politically, to the ongoing American crises of the early twenty-first century.

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