

Shibboleths

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What qualifies me as a liberal? Or as a conservative?

Yes, I'm really asking, because so much of what passes for political discourse these days seems to hinge on one's allegiance to one or the other of these descriptors. And, truth be told, I'm not convinced any two people of my acquaintance use the terms in precisely the same way.

Is a conservative one who wants to conserve the status quo? And if so, does that desire apply across the broadest spectrum of considerations or solely across selected issues?

Is the liberal bent defined broadly in terms of compassion and fair play? Or does the term express devotion to the politics of liberation? And if so, liberation of whom and from what? Are you a strict follower of the dogma offered in Stokely Carmichael's book of that name? And if so, is your liberalism tied solely to the search for racial equality? Or does it take a broader cast?

Are Republicans conservative? And if so, am I allowed to think of myself as generally conservative even as that political party with which I formerly identified moves ever farther from the principles I thought it once embraced?

What about those who fashion ourselves as socially liberal but fiscally conservative? Since so much of the power structure, both macro and micro, is driven by economics, is this dichotomy even possible in this day and age? Was it ever?

I'm not convinced there's anything magical about any of these terms and certainly, they no longer seem particularly useful in thoughtful discourse, if indeed they ever were.

We need to step away from labeling that has long since ceased to describe the contents of the can. Among the thoughtful and fair minded, there are no true shibboleths. No secret words or phrases the use of which identifies wolves vs sheep. (Okay, using the n-word or other such slurs does identify you but not as a political animal, just as a worthless a-hole.)

In the Declaration of Independence, our founders were forthright in defining certain 'truths' as 'self-evident.' And they were being intentional when they began the Constitution with a preamble, setting out the reasons and intent for its drafting. Then, in Article Five, immediately after establishing the three branches and the role of the states they addressed a method for amending the document, implicitly admitting they probably didn't get it completely right on the first try.

In other words, they tried very hard to lay things out in plain language, free of hidden meaning or subterfuge. No shibboleths to identify the 'in crowd.' We're all the in crowd (okay, not so much at the time of the framing, non-whites and non-males being the glaring exceptions, and we continue to root out structural injustice, proving the wisdom of Article 5).

I'm getting down to this: No more magic passwords, please. I can't reasonably claim allegiance to either end of the political spectrum, but I do hold some truths to be self-evident and I base my political beliefs on those core values. Time to say what we think, with clarity and purpose and then to vote our consciences. Anything less simply won't serve.