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October 26, 2009

Conservatives Maintain Edge as Top Ideological Group

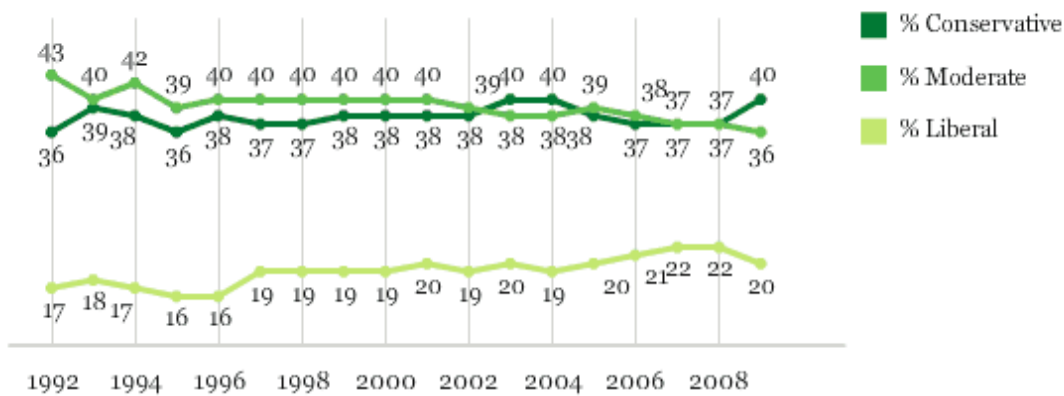
Compared with 2008, more Americans “conservative” in general, and on issues

by Lydia Saad

PRINCETON, NJ -- Conservatives continue to outnumber moderates and liberals in the American populace in 2009, confirming [a finding that Gallup first noted in June](#). Forty percent of Americans describe their political views as conservative, 36% as moderate, and 20% as liberal. This marks a shift from 2005 through 2008, when moderates were tied with conservatives as the most prevalent group.

Political Ideology -- Annual Trends

How would you describe your political views -- [very conservative, conservative, (or) moderate, liberal, (or) very liberal]?



Annual averages, 1992-2009; 2009 data based on January-September surveys

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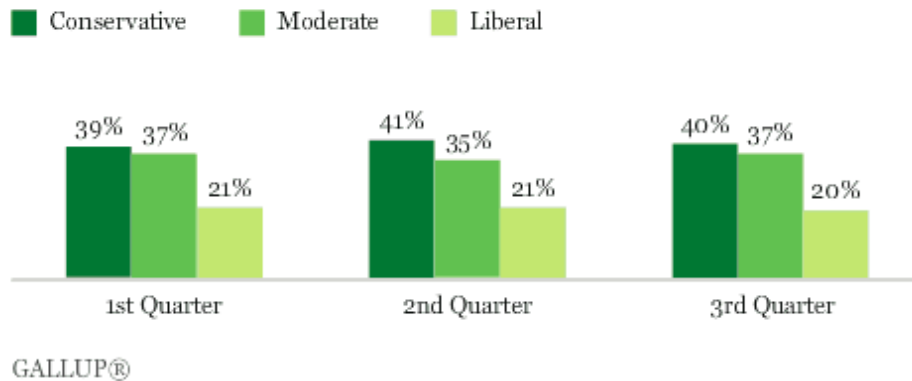
The 2009 data are based on 16 separate Gallup surveys conducted from January through September, encompassing more than 5,000 national adults per quarter. Conservatives have been the dominant ideological group each quarter, with between 39% and 41% of Americans identifying themselves as either "very conservative" or "conservative." Between 35% and 37% of Americans call themselves "moderate," while the percentage calling themselves "very liberal" or "liberal" has consistently registered between 20% and 21% --

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making liberals the smallest of the three groups.

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Political Ideology -- 2009, by Quarter

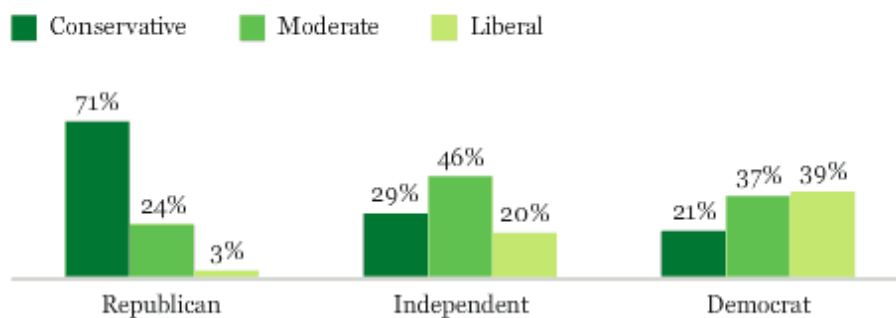


Independents Inch to the Right

Changes among political independents appear to be the main reason the percentage of conservatives has increased nationally over the past year: the 35% of independents describing their views as conservative in 2009 is up from 29% in 2008. By contrast, among Republicans and Democrats, the percentage who are "conservative" has increased by one point each.

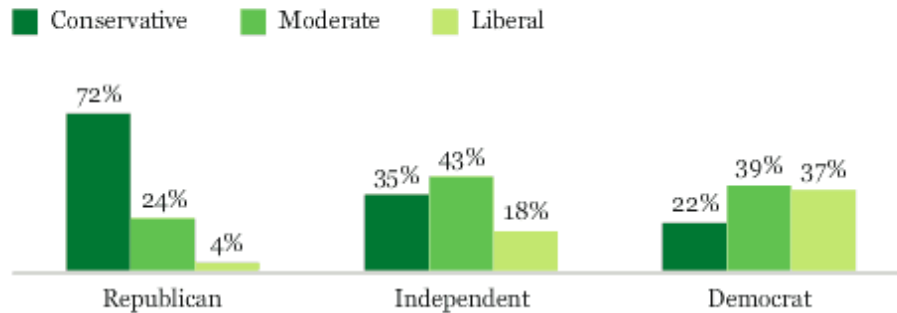
As is typical in recent years, Republicans are far more unified in their political outlook than are either independents or Democrats. While 72% of Republicans in 2009 call their views conservative, independents are closely split between the moderate and conservative labels (43% and 35%, respectively). Democrats are about evenly divided between moderates (39%) and liberals (37%).

Political Ideology -- 2008, by Party ID



Based on surveys conducted January-December 2008

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Political Ideology -- 2009, by Party ID

Based on surveys conducted January-September 2009

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Americans Also Moving Right on Some Issues

In addition to the increase in conservatism on this general ideology measure, Gallup finds higher percentages of Americans expressing conservative views on several specific issues in 2009 than in 2008.

- Perceptions that there is too much government regulation of business and industry [jumped from 38% in September 2008 to 45% in September 2009](#).
- The percentage of Americans saying they would like to see labor unions have less influence in the country [rose from 32% in August 2008 to a record-high 42% in August 2009](#).
- Public support for keeping the laws governing the sale of firearms the same or making them less strict [rose from 49% in October 2008 to 55% in October 2009](#), also a record high. (The percentage saying the laws should become *more* strict -- the traditionally liberal position -- fell from 49% to 44%.)
- The percentage of Americans favoring a decrease in immigration [rose from 39% in June/July 2008 to 50% in July 2009](#).
- The propensity to want the government to "promote traditional values" -- as opposed to "not favor any particular set of values" -- [rose from 48% in 2008 to 53% in 2009](#). Current support for promoting traditional values is the highest seen in five years.
- The percentage of Americans who consider themselves "pro-life" on abortion rose from 44% in May 2008 to 51% in May 2009, [and remained at a slightly elevated 47% in July 2009](#).
- Americans' belief that the global warming problem is "exaggerated" in the news [rose from 35% in March 2008 to 41% in March 2009](#).

Gallup has not recorded heightened conservatism on all major social and political views held by Americans. For instance, attitudes on the death penalty, gay marriage, the Iraq war, and Afghanistan have stayed about the same since 2008. However, there are no major examples of U.S. public opinion becoming more liberal in the past year. (Gallup's annual trends on healthcare will be updated in

November, so those attitudes are not included in this review.)

The conservative shifts discussed here result as much from changes in political independents' views as from changes in Republicans' views. Democrats' views, by contrast, have generally changed only slightly -- either to the conservative or liberal side -- with two exceptions: Gallup finds greater movement in Democrats' views of abortion, which have become more liberal, and their views of labor unions, which have become more conservative.

Issue Positions and Changes in Those Positions, 2008 vs. 2009 -- by Party ID

Conservative position	Repub- licans	Indepen- dents	Democ- rats
Government regulation -- "too much"			
Change	+14	+12	-2
2009	70%	50%	21%
2008	56%	38%	23%
Labor union preference -- "have less influence"			
Change	+14	+10	+10
2009	63%	44%	26%
2008	49%	34%	16%
Sale of firearms -- "stay the same"/"make less strict"			
Change	+5	+10	+2
2009	71%	62%	34%
2008	66%	52%	32%
Immigration -- "decreased"			
Change	+15	+9	+5
2009	61%	46%	44%
2008	46%	37%	39%
Government role -- "promote traditional values"			
Change	-4	+17	+5
2009	67%	54%	42%
2008	71%	37%	37%
Abortion -- "pro-life"			
Change	+1	+12	-7
2009	67%	50%	28%
2008	66%	38%	35%
Global warming -- "exaggerated"			
Change	+7	+11	+4
2009	66%	44%	22%
2008	59%	33%	18%

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Bottom Line

Americans are more likely to consider themselves conservative this year than they were in 2008, resulting in conservatives -- now 40% of the American public -- outnumbering moderates for the first time since 2004. While Gallup first documented this trend in June, the finding has been sustained through the third quarter.

Conservatism is most prevalent among Republicans. However, the overall increase in this ideological stance since 2008 comes largely from political independents, among whom 35% say they are conservatives thus far in 2009 -- compared with 29% last year. Independents have also become more conservative on a number of specific policy issues, including government and union power, the role of government relative to promoting values, gun laws, immigration, global warming, and abortion. Republicans, most of whom considered themselves ideologically conservative in 2008, have also grown more conservative on several of these issues this year, while less change is seen among Democrats.

All of this has potentially important implications at the ballot box, particularly for the 2010 midterm elections. The question is whether increased conservatism, particularly among independents, will translate into heightened support for Republican candidates. Right now, it appears it may. Although Gallup polling continues to show the Democratic Party leading the Republican Party in Americans' party identification, that lead has been narrowing since the beginning of the year and now stands at six points, the smallest since 2005. [According to Gallup Managing Editor Jeff Jones](#), "the Democratic-Republican gap is narrowing because more independents now say they lean to the Republican Party." That trend aligns with the recent changes in how independents perceive their own ideology and where they stand on some key issues.

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Survey Methods

The 2009 political ideology results reported here are based on 16 aggregated Gallup surveys conducted from January to September 2009. For results based on the total sample of 16,321 national adults, aged 18 and older, one can say with 95% confidence that the maximum margin of sampling error is ± 1 percentage point.

Interviews are conducted with respondents on land-line telephones (for respondents with a land-line telephone) and cellular phones (for respondents who are cell-phone only).

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

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