

LESSON 2

THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM

The political spectrum provides a way to characterize different beliefs and ideologies, and distinguish between actions on civic issues.

The political spectrum can be viewed with two intersecting scales: one for economic/fiscal policies and one for social/personal policies. The underlying question is: To what degree should the government intervene or exert control in these two spheres.

- **Liberal/Left-leaning** people embrace social services and government intervention in the economy.
- **Conservative/Right-leaning** people support lower taxes, free markets and less government intervention in the economy.
- **Libertarians** advocate both personal and economic liberty (freedom).
- **Authoritarians** favour strict obedience to authority and government control, at the expense of personal and economic freedom.

Other related terms associated with the two scales include: fiscally conservative, fiscally moderate or liberal, socially conservative and socially liberal or moderate. Some people argue that it is possible to be conservative for one scale, and liberal or moderate on the other. While others argue that it is not possible since they are inherently linked.

Related to fiscal/economic issues, Canadians who are left-leaning most often believe that:

- The government can play a positive role in managing the economy and creating jobs, as opposed to simply letting the private sector be responsible for creating jobs.
- A large gap between the richest and poorest parts of society should be avoided as much as possible.
- Wealthier individuals and corporations should pay a greater share of taxes than poorer individuals.
- There is good value in government services, such as education and healthcare, and higher taxes and government debt may be necessary to ensure these services are sufficient.
- Policies that might be considered bad for businesses but are intended to alleviate social or environmental problems, like climate change, are important for the greater good.

While Canadians who are right-leaning on fiscal/economic issues most often believe that:

- Businesses and individuals should receive as much support as possible in order to create jobs, wealth and innovation.

- Inequality is not a concern. People who are financially successful are being rewarded for their contributions to society.
- Smaller government is the best approach, which means less government influence on the economy and fewer government services.
- Taxes should be as low as possible and the government should avoid going into debt.
- Regulation on businesses is not necessary because the free market provides sufficient incentives for businesses to pursue important social and environmental outcomes.

On social/personal issues like abortion, same-sex marriage or gun control, social liberals or left-leaning Canadians are most likely to support progressive policies, which advocate improvement of society by reform.

Social conservatives do not support reform on social/personal issues. They most often believe that society is fragile and must be maintained through duty, traditional values and established institutions.