The constitution and American political practices embody two different theories of politics: a libertarian (individualist or classical liberal) approach and communitarian (classical republican) approach. These two competing philosophies contain somewhat different assumptions about human nature and politics and have produced much of the constitutional conflict in this nation’s history.

**Libertarian Theory:** This approach assumes that individuals take precedence over government. They inherently possess certain rights which the government should preserve and promote. This view assumes that human beings are capable of choice and development on their own without the help of government. Government should merely provide the institutions and mechanisms which will enable individuals to exercise their rights and pursue their private interests. Individuals are more important than the political community, and their rights and interests supersede those of the community. Libertarians see government as necessary because the clash of individual interests creates conflict. This requires institutions which can mediate these differences. The ideal government as envisioned by libertarians would be one in which general, impersonal laws and disinterested judges provide the peace and security under which each person can pursue private interests. Thus, the libertarian has a notion of justice that is purely procedural in nature. A procedural view of justice sees the political system as legitimate as long as it applies fair rules and procedures equally to all persons. Persons using these procedures to obtain vastly different results is not seen as being unjust. For example, a college admissions system may be based on merit. High school seniors will be admitted to college if they achieve a certain grade point average and adequate scores on college admissions tests. Those who do not meet the standards are not admitted. Though this system differentiates between people, it is procedurally just because it applies what are believed to be appropriate standards equally to all persons. (This perspective is basically what is called the liberal tradition in Western political thought. The classical liberal theory of liberalism appears in the writings of John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Milton Friedman and the actions of the American Civil Liberties Union).

**Communitarian Theory:** This perspective emphasizes the positive role that government plays in the lives of its people. This view asserts that individuals are not completely independent, but rather, have an inherent need for association with their fellows in the political community. Whereas the individualist-libertarian approach assumes that people can choose and develop on their own, the communitarian approach contends that people need the community and its values to nurture their development and enable them to make proper choices. Under this view, democratic government exists not only to recognize and protect individual rights and to satisfy personal interests, but also to bring individuals together into a political community to solve public problems. Politics is not a necessary evil to be limited in scope and function. Thus, communitarians recognize that the “public interest” creates responsibilities that may override the individual’s rights. Whenever a conflict occurs between individual rights and the public interest, the communitarian resolves the conflict on the side of the public interest. Thus, the
political majority may sometimes need to impose certain values on individuals who find
themselves in the minority.

Communitarians take a **substantive** view of **justice**. Whereas the libertarian is satisfied with fair
procedures as a measure of justice, the communitarian is more likely to look at the fairness of the
results obtained. This view contends that vast inequalities among individuals are potentially
damaging to society as a whole and supports the use of government power to achieve greater
justice. In college admission systems for example, communitarian theory supports affirmative
action on behalf of minorities to redress institutional inequalities. Thus a college may give
admissions preference to minority group members in order to increase their numbers in higher
education and obtain a just result for all elements in society, even though such action may
discriminate against individuals who are not minorities. (The communitarian view is
based on the **republican** tradition in Western political thought found in the writings of Aristotle,
Cicero, Rousseau, Thomas Jefferson and contemporaries such as Amitai Etzioni and Benjamin
Barber).