

Conservatism

What is conservatism?

Most of what I have told you regarding liberalism is conventional wisdom
There is a consensus regarding the definition of liberalism, classic and modern

When it comes to conservatism there is no such consensus
Some argue that modern American conservatism is simply a restatement of classic liberalism. That is generally true regarding economic policy but definitely not true regarding social issues, crime and foreign policy.

Classic Conservatism

Developed in Europe in response to liberalism and the French Revolution

Major themes

Pessimism regarding human nature. As one of my conservative friends put it years ago: “Steve, you liberals base your policies on how you wish people were, we conservatives base our policies on how people really are”

Classic conservatives believe that liberals and socialists have overly optimistic views of human nature.

Conservatives argue that individuals are basically motivated by self interest
Problems like crime, violence, war, cruelty, poverty, racism, have their origins in human nature, not socio-economic conditions.

Distrust of Reason

Liberal optimism has overstated the extent to which humans are rational.
Liberals focus too much on abstract ideals and not enough on common sense, faith and traditional values.

Tradition

Conservatives look to traditional values for inspiration. Their view is that certain traditions, norms, and institutions have withstood the test of time. They represent the wisdom of the ages. Liberals are too quick to dismiss

these traditions as old fashioned. But but for conservatives, these traditions are the fabric of society.

Current example Liberals are more likely to question traditional gender roles. For liberals, these traditional roles have restricted the freedom of women, and men too, for that matter. We need to re-think these arbitrary social constructs.

Conservatives are more likely to believe that these roles are based largely on biology, and have been the basis of our civilization for centuries. Perhaps they should be modified , but “don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater”

Order and stability

As Samuel Huntington put it” You can have order without liberty, but you cannot have liberty without order”. The primary task of government is to provide order, safety, stability, only then can liberty exist.

Current Example. Conservatives are more likely to support the death penalty and other strong measures to combat crime. Conservatives are more likely to favor military spending over social programs.

Inequality, privilege and hierarchy

Conservatives argue that liberals and socialists have overemphasized and idealized equality. The simple fact is that people are not equal. they differ in their abilities, and moral qualities. Most socio-economic inequality is a reflection of those differences. Conservative oppose what they see as artificial leveling

Gradual Change

Conservatives are not opposed to change. However, they are opposed to change that is rapid and radical. Change should be gradual and within the framework of existing institutions and traditional values. In their zeal for progress, liberals create chaos. Notice how this is perfectly consistent with the conservative emphasis on order, tradition and their view of human nature “The more you try to create heaven on earth, the more you create hell on earth”

Transition from Classic to Modern Conservatism

We have already noted how classic liberalism developed into modern liberalism.

Conservatism went through a similar transition as the ideology responded to industrialization, the emergence of socialism and the changing nature of liberalism.

As many in the liberal camp abandoned their faith in laissez faire and minimal government, classic liberals disagreed. Indeed they believed that the modern liberals had abandoned traditional liberal values.

For them .activist government, in the form of higher taxes, economic regulation and increased spending on social programs was a threat to individual liberty.

Do you agree with that argument? Does the progressive income tax infringe on the rights of successful individuals? Does a minimum wage law violate restrict the liberty of the employer?

In essence, they saw modern liberalism drifting towards socialism

Their arguments also drew from classic conservatism. The changes sought by modern liberals were seen as treats to tradition

Many classic liberals were now conservatives. They saw themselves as defenders of the traditions that made America great; The traditions of free enterprise, rugged individualism, limited government and states rights.

With the triumph of the New Deal, and the creation of the welfare state, their concerns increased. .

The Road to Serfdom by Friedrich Hayek was published in 1945. He was an Austrian economist who argued that an economy based on centralized planning was the road to totalitarianism. This became a very influential argument

The Cold War and Anti Communism 1946-1989

During the Cold War anti-communism was part of a consensus embraced by both liberals and conservatives. Containment of communism was the foundation of U. S foreign policy

However, conservatives were definitely more militant in their anti-communism

For conservative, communism was an international movement, and its goal was to conquer the Free World.

The most extreme form of anti-communism was McCarthyism, the belief that the communist conspiracy had infiltrated many aspects of American society: government, universities, Hollywood, even some churches. Liberals claimed that this resulted in “witch hunts that ruined many lives.

Even those conservatives who did not embrace conservatism still argued for a harder line against international communism. Liberals were often seen as ‘soft of communism”

A “hawkish” foreign policy would be central to American Conservatism for years to come

Hence the concern of some conservatives regarding Trump’s foreign policy and his coziness with Putin

NOTE “Hawks” believe that the world is a dangerous place. The U. S. must have the world strongest military and be willing to use it.

Not So Recent History

The Goldwater Campaign of 1964

The Republican Party had been dominated by moderates like Eisenhower and Nixon. Senator Barry Goldwater led an insurgent conservative movement demanding that their party offer a “choice not an echo”. Goldwater won the nomination.but lost in a landslide to Lyndon Johnson, a liberal Democrat. But his campaign marked a turning point.

The party was now moving to the right. Goldwater was critical of liberal social programs, like the War on Poverty, he supported escalation of the war in Vietnam (ironically, Lyndon Johnson did escalate the war in his second term) Goldwater was a staunch advocate of states rights and opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act. (his position was that racial discrimination was morally wrong, but “morality could not be legislated”

Backlash

The 1960's was a decade of turmoil. The civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, the anti war movement, the black power movement, hippies, the beginnings of a women's liberation movement, and a gay rights movement. The times were changing and many people resented and resisted those changes. There was a backlash to the sixties that provided fresh fuel for the conservative movement. The South which had been solidly Democratic since Reconstruction was voting Republican, the white working class was becoming more conservative on social issues.

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 was a conservative triumph. The Republican Party was now a conservative party and they had captured the presidency. Reagan's persuaded Congress to pass major tax cuts, major cuts in social spending and major increases in defense spending. He also appointed conservative judges to the federal courts. Conservatives were now in power.

1994 was another turning point. Republicans won majority in House of Representatives for the first time since 1958. Led by Speaker Newt Gingrich these were a new breed of militant conservatives, not interested in compromise. The moderate wing of the Republican Party had been soundly defeated. Today moderate means moderate conservative.

Cultural Conservatism and the Rise of the Religious Right

Prior to 1980 Evangelical Christians did not constitute a voting block But now their religious conservatism would be channeled into political conservatism

This did not just happen. Organizations like The Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition helped bring it about

The focus was on issues like abortion, prayer in public school, opposition to feminism and gay rights.

As one writer put it

For the religious right, secular humanism soon replaced communism as the prime ideological enemy and became foundational to the notion of culture war between two totalistic world views.

The 1992 Republican platform included

A ban on all abortions without exceptions

Opposition to civil rights for homosexuals

End public funding for obscene art

Opposed contraceptives being made available in public schools

Endorsed home schooling

Supported prayer in public schools

In my opinion, which you need not agree with, modern conservatism is a juxtaposition of classic liberalism and classic conservatism. On economic policy modern conservatives are restating classic liberal ideas. So on economic issues, conservative usually do favor less government intervention

But conservatives are not libertarians. They do see a role for strong government in national defense, fighting crime and defending traditional values. In that sense they are like the classic conservatives.

Contemporary American Conservatism: Current Factions

Sometimes these groups overlap and sometimes they don't

The Free Marketeers emphasize economic policy. They support tax cuts, cuts in social programs, less regulation of business, and scaling back of environmental regulations

The Religious Right focuses on cultural conservatism. They see themselves as defenders of traditional values, and believe that those values are under liberal attack

The Populists are relatively new to the conservative movement and are among the most ardent supporters of President Trump. Overwhelmingly white, working class, and often rural, they feel that they have been left out and ignored by both parties. Many of them see Trump as a different kind of politician who speaks their language and understands their needs. Many of them hate big business as much as they hate big government. They militantly oppose illegal immigration and think that even legal immigration must be curtailed. They believe that American workers are losing their jobs to immigrants and “bad trade deals”. Like most conservatives they are strong supporters of the Second Amendment.

The neo-conservatives, once dominate, are a weaker faction today. They are foreign policy hawks who believe that America must use its military might to protect its interests and to promote its values. They favor a hard line against China and Iran. They have mixed views of Trump’s foreign policy

The traditionalists are the remaining classic conservatives. They emphasize order, and tradition but are not always in accord with the Religious Right. For them Trump is not a true conservative.

So if Donald Trump is not a true conservative why does he have the support of most conservatives?

His economic policies have generally pleased the free marketeers
His appointment of conservative judges pleases the religious right
His anti immigrant, America First ideology appeals to the populists
He can satisfy most neo-cons if adopts an aggressive stance toward China

It will be interesting to see the direction that American Conservatism takes in the post Trump era. Will there be a post-Trump era, or will Trump’s version of right-wing populism be a permanent feature of American politics?

Conclusion and Summary

We have covered a lot here.

This is what is most important

Relationship between classic conservatism and modern conservatism

Relationship between classic liberalism and modern conservatism

Major factions of contemporary conservatism