

# Conservatism

Political conservatism had its origins in a reaction against attempts to modernize the French state in the 18th century and to the French Revolution. A prominent figure in this movement was Edmund Burke. It also subsequently included a reaction against industrialization and market economies.

Moving on to the British conservative movement of the 19th century, we find conservatism espousing traditional, usually religious, morality and advocating a government role in fostering and maintaining it, which they saw as part of the state's obligation to maintain a social order in which everyone had their place and knew it. They generally saw the political values of liberty and equality as impediments, if not, threats to maintaining the traditional social order.

In the 20th century conservatism appears to be represented by several different factions. First, there is European conservatism that is reflected in the views of Leo Strauss here in the U.S. This brand places great emphasis on the role of moral principles (theirs of course) and an activist role for government in establishing and enforcing it. They also, somewhat contradictorily, believe in government by Realpolitik; i.e., justifying the use of political power by practical outcomes.

The second brand, which is associated with William Bennett and Newt Gingrich is rooted in traditional social and religious views, rejects the notion of the U.S. as a pluralistic society and rejects the idea that society can operate on the basis of abstract rights. It is populist in that it places an emphasis on the wisdom of ordinary people and holds that the decay in the traditional moral and social order is a product of government. This brand sees government as the principle vehicle for imposing its idea of the "correct" moral and social order.

The third brand, which is associated with Irving Kristol and Patrick Moynihan is sometimes referred to as neo-conservatism. Neoconservatives are basically refugees from welfare liberalism who still favor the welfare state and who believe that welfare liberalism has abandoned values necessary to a just society. They base their values not on religious grounds but on what they think will produce a just or good society. Government has a vital role to play in their scheme in imposing those values that they believe will produce a just society. They are generally hostile to economic liberals and classical liberals.

The fourth brand, which is sort of a composted variety includes a variation, represented by Ronald Reagan, which buys into the classic liberal ideas on economics coupled with an emphasis on the traditional or religious values emphasis in conservative thought.

Other movements that have been influenced by conservatism include Communitarians, who have adopted the idea from conservatives that government needs to be active in preserving the social order and especially the idea of community. Then there are Environmentalists who have picked up on the earlier conservative idea that economic growth is destructive to society and that government needs to be active in regulating economic growth and its impact. Finally, the Feminists who have been influenced by traditional moral and religious values in conservatism in their opposition to such things as pornography and the role of government in suppressing modes of expression thought to be demeaning to women.

Adapted from lectures by Jeremy Shearmur of the Australian National University.