

The Conservative Revolution in American Politics and Policy

From the perspective of the 1960s and early 1970s, there was little to suggest that a profound shift in American politics and public policy was about to occur. A majority of the population identified with the Democratic Party, which was commonly presented as the “natural” party in American politics. The Democratic Party had retained control of both houses of Congress since 1955. Kennedy’s New Frontier and Johnson’s War on Poverty and Great Society all reflected a great optimism regarding the potential role of the state and public policy in eliminating pressing social and economic problems. The period witnessed a revolution in civil rights (e.g., the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act); a successful Keynesian policy and high levels of growth; the rapid expansion of the welfare state (e.g., the introduction of Head Start, Medicare, Medicaid, the liberalization of AFDC); and new social regulatory experiments in consumer protection, environmental protection, and occupational safety and health. Given these policy victories, the success of the anti-war movement, and the resignation of Richard Nixon, it appeared that all that was left was to write the obituary of the American Right.

From the perspective of today, things are strikingly different than they were in 1970. The GOP has controlled the White House for 26 of the past 38 years. The two Democratic presidents, Carter and Clinton, were southern centrists rather than representatives of the left wing of the Democratic Party. In 1981, unified Democratic control of the Congress ended, with unified Republican control taking its place after the 1994 midterm elections. Comparable shifts in partisan control occurred at the state level. These political victories have been accompanied by significant changes in macroeconomic management, tax policy, welfare policy, education, regulation, and foreign policy.

It is the core assumption of this seminar that one cannot understand contemporary politics without understanding the rise of conservatism and the principles underlying the arguments and reforms promoted by its key figures. This course is designed to explore whether we have witnessed a conservative “revolution” in American politics and public policy and American political development more generally. We are interested in understanding the debates within American conservatism, and their impact on politics and policy. To what extent are the internal divisions a source of strength and dynamism? To what extent do they place limitations on the future impact of American conservatism? Has the conservative movement run its course? Can it accommodate broader changes in American society, culture and public opinion?

The following books are available at the Wesleyan bookstore:

George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*. (Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998). 188292620X

Gregory L. Schneider, ed., *Conservatism in America Since 1930*. (NYU Press, 2003). 0814797997

Dinesh D'Souza, *Ronald Reagan: How An Ordinary Man Became An Extraordinary Leader*. (Free Press, 1999). 0684848236

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America*. (Penguin Press, 2004). 0143035398

Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy*. (Yale University Press, 2006). 0300119755

Ryan Sager, *The Elephant in the Room: Evangelicals, Libertarians, and the Battle to Control the Republican Party*. (Wiley, 2006). 0471793329

William Martin, *With God On Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*. (New York: Broadway Books, 1997). 0767922573

Course requirements

Participation (10 percent)

The success of any seminar depends heavily on the quality of preparation and participation. Seminar members will be expected to attend class with knowledge of the core readings and evidence that you have reflected on the key debates and controversies.

Seminar Presentations (30 percent):

Each participant will be required to introduce a set of readings on three occasions during the semester. The presentation—not to exceed five minutes—should provide a brief critique of the readings and present questions for discussion. It should be accompanied by a 1 page written summary for distribution. Given the number of seminar participants, presenters will have the opportunity to divide up key readings.

Critical Essays (40 percent)

There are several questions posed in the appendix of this syllabus. Over the course of the semester, each participant is required to submit 4 short essays (not to exceed 5 pages) engaging his or her choice of questions. Essays will be graded on the basis of exhibited

mastery of relevant course readings and quality of argumentation. All papers should be submitted via email as Word attachments (meisner@wesleyan.edu).

Final Essay (20 percent)

The final course essay will address the larger question of whether there has been a conservative revolution in the United States. For this essay, address the following:

There is little question that American conservatives have realized great electoral success in the past several decades. However, can one conclude that there has been something that one can accurately characterize as a conservative “revolution?” If so, what are the key features of this revolution? Is it likely to have a permanent impact on American politics and public policy? Alternatively, if no revolution occurred, explain why this is the case and why so many commentators have gotten things so wrong.

This paper should not exceed 10 pages and is due before the final session. It should be submitted via email as Word attachments (meisner@wesleyan.edu).

Contacts

I am available by email (meisner@wesleyan.edu) which I check obsessively, and can meet with students before or after class by appointment. I also hold regular office hours at 317 Public Affairs Center (M 11-1, W 4-5). My office phone number is 860-685-2494.

Class Schedule Fall 2007

Session 1 Introduction (September 5)

Background

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, introduction, chapter 1

Recommended Reading:

Peter Berkowitz, ed., *Varieties Of Conservatism In America*. (Hoover Institution Press, 2004).

Session 2 Defining Conservatism in the New Deal Order (September 12)

Background

George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, chapters 1-5

2.1 The Old Right

“Southern Agrarians and the Defense of Religion.” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 9.

Seward Collins, “Monarch as Alternative.” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 16.

Albert Jay Nock, “Radical Individualism: The State as Enemy.” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 29.

“Conservatism Takes Shape.” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 45.

Recommended Reading:

Albert Jay Nock, *The State of the Union: Essays in Social Criticism*, ed. Charles H. Hamilton. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991).

2.2 Classic Liberalism/Libertarianism

F.A. Hayek, “Resurrecting the Abandoned Road.” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 53.

Mont Pelerin Society, “Getting Together.” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p.66.

Milton Friedman, “Defining Principles: Capitalism and Freedom.” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p.68.

The Libertarian Review: Editorial Statement,” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 251

Murray N. Rothbard, “Why Be Libertarian?” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 253

Murray N. Rothbard, “What is Libertarianism?” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 262

Recommended Reading:

Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement*. (Public Affairs, 2007).

2.3 Traditionalism

Richard Weaver, “The Quest for Order.” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 95.

Russell Kirk, “The Conservative Mind.” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 107.

Frank S. Meyer, “A Rebel in Search of Tradition.” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 122.

Recommended Reading:

Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, 7th ed. (Regnery, 2001).

2.4 Anticommunism

Whittaker Chambers, “A Witness.” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 135.

Gerhart Niemeyer, “The Communist Mind.” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 149.

William F. Buckley, Jr., “Khrushchev at the UN.” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 161.

“The Hungary Pledge.” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 167.

Session 3 In Search of a Conservative Consensus (September 19)

Background

George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, chapters 6-8

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, chapter 2.

3.1 Fusionism

Frank S. Meyer, "A Rebel Finds His Tradition." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 171.

Frank S. Meyer, "Libertarianism or Libertinism?" In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 259.

F.A. Hayek, "Why I Am Not a Conservative." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 180.

William F. Buckley, Jr., "National Review: Statement of Intentions." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 195.

William F. Buckley, Jr., "National Review: Credenda and Statement of Principles." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 201.

Recommended Reading:

Murray Rothbard, "Frank S. Meyer: The Fusionist as Libertarian Manqué." *Modern Age*, (Fall 1981). [Download](#)

3.2 Making the Argument: the 1964 Election

Barry M. Goldwater, "The Conscience of a Conservative." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 211.

William F. Buckley, Jr., "The Young Americans for Freedom." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 226.

"The Sharon Statement." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 229.

Phyllis Schlafly, "A Choice, Not an Echo." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 231.

Barry M. Goldwater, "Extremism in the Defense of Liberty." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p.238.

Ronald Reagan, "A Time for Choosing" October 27, 1964. [Download](#)

Recommended Reading:

Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*. (Hill & Wang, 2002).

Session 4 The Culture Wars and the 1960s (September 26)

Background:

George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, chapters 9-11.

4.1 The Challenge from the Left

Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society, 1962 [Download](#)
(excerpt)

Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, Introduction to 1966 edition [Download](#)

4.2 Making Sense of the 1960s: The Origins of the Culture War

Russell Kirk, "The University and Revolution: An Insane Conjunction." *The Intercollegiate Review*, Winter 1969-70. [Download](#)

Murray N. Rothbard, "The Student Revolution." From *The Libertarian Forum*, May 1, 1969. [Download](#)

Patrick Buchanan's Speech to 1992 GOP Convention. [Download](#)

Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Democratic Remedies for Democratic Disorders." *The Public Interest*, Spring 1998. [Download](#)

Robert H. Bork, "Hard Truths about the Culture War." *First Things*, 54 (June/July 1995): 18-23. [Download](#)

John Fonte, "Why There Is A Culture War: Gramsci and Tocqueville in America." *Policy Review*, December 2000-January 2001 [Download](#)

Recommended Reading:

Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline*. (Basic Books, 1996).

Session 5 The Counter-Mobilization (October 3)

Background

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, chapter 3

5.1 Business Mobilization

Irving Kristol, "Why Big Business is Good for America." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 318.

David Vogel, "The Power of Business in America: A Re-Appraisal." *British Journal of Political Science*, 13, 1 (1983): 19-43. [Download](#)

Kay Lehman Schlozman, "What Accent the Heavenly Chorus? Political Equality and the American Pressure System." *The Journal of Politics*, 46, 4 (1984): 1006-1032. [Download](#)

Recommended Reading:

David Vogel, *Fluctuating Fortunes: The Political Power of Business in America*. (New York: Beard Books, 2003).

5.2 Republican Party-Building

Robert J. Huckshorn; John F. Bibby, "National Party Rules and Delegate Selection in the Republican Party." *PS*, 16, 4. (Autumn, 1983): 656-666. [Download](#)

David Adamany, "The New Faces of American Politics." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 486, Regulating Campaign Finance. (Jul., 1986): 12-33. [Download](#)

Recommended Reading:

Lewis L. Gould, *Grand Old Party: A History of the Republicans*. (Random House, 2003).

5.3 Waging the War of Ideas

Andrew Rich, "War of Ideas: Why Mainstream and Liberal Foundations and the Think Tanks they Support are Losing in the War of Ideas in American Politics." *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring 2005. [Download](#)

National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, *The Strategic Philanthropy of Conservative Foundations* (1997) (Note: this is a summary of the report) [Download](#)

Recommended Reading:

Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*. (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Session 6 The Mobilization of Morality (October 10)

William A. Rusher, "An Emerging Conservative Majority." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 279.

Samuel Francis, "Message from MARS: The Social Politics of the New Right." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 300.

William Martin, *With God On Our Side*, introduction, chapters 1-8.

Recommended Readings:

Phillip E. Hammond, "The Curious Path of Conservative Protestantism." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 480, (Jul., 1985), pp. 53-62.

[Download](#)

Ronald E. Hopson and Donald R. Smith, "Changing Fortunes: An Analysis of Christian Right Ascendance within American Political Discourse." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 38, 1. (1999):1-13. [Download](#)

Session 7 The Reagan "Revolution" (October 17)

7.1 The Reagan Presidency

Dinesh D'Souza, *Ronald Reagan*, entire.

7.2 Conservatism and the Reagan Era

William Martin, *With God On Our Side*, chapters 9.

George Will, "Looking Back at the Gipper." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p.362.

Stephen J. Tonsor, "Why I Am Not a Neoconservative." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p.373

Dan Himmelfarb, "Conservative Splits." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 383

Recommended Readings

Murray N. Rothbard, "Ronald Reagan: An Autopsy." *Liberty*, March 1989. [Download](#)

John Patrick Diggins, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History*. (Norton, 2006).

Session 8 The Implications for Politics and Public Policy (October 24)

Background

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, chapters 4-7

8.1 Resurgent Republicans and Democratic Centrists

New Gingrich, "Contract with America." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 424.

Jeffrey B. Gayner, "The Contract with America: Implementing New Ideas In the U.S." Heritage Lecture #549 October 12, 1995. [Download](#)

President William Jefferson Clinton, State of the Union Address, January 23, 1996
[Download](#)

Tod Lindberg, "Gingrich Lost and Found." *Policy Review* 94 (April & May 1999).
[Download](#)

8.2 A Nation Divided?

William Martin, *With God On Our Side*, chapters 10-13.

James L. Guth, Lyman A. Kellstedt, John C. Green & Corwin E. Smidt, "America Fifty/Fifty." *First Things* 116 (October 2001): 19-26. [Download](#)

John C. Green, Corwin E. Smidt, James L. Guth, and Lyman A. Kellstedt, "The American Religious Landscape and the 2004 Presidential Vote: Increased Polarization." *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* (February 2005). [Download](#)

Recommended Reading:

Michael Meeropol, *Surrender: How the Clinton Administration Completed the Reagan Revolution*. (University of Michigan Press, 2000).

Session 9 The Politics of Unified Control (October 31)

Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off Center*, entire.

Recommended Readings:

Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*. (Owl Books, 2005).

Thomas Edsall, *Building Red America*. (Basic Books, 2006).

Session 10 George Bush: Consolidation or Betrayal? (November 7)

Sager, *The Elephant in the Room*, entire.

Recommended Readings:

James Bovard, *The Bush Betrayal*. (Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

Damon Linker, *The Theocons: Secular America Under Siege*. (Doubleday, 2006).

Richard A. Viguerie, *Conservatives Betrayed: How George W. Bush and Other Big Government Republicans Hijacked the Conservative Cause*. (Bonus Books, 2006).

Session 11 Contemporary Conservative Fault Lines (November 14)

11.1 Foreign Policy: The Bush Doctrine

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, chapter 8

John T. Correll, "The Evolution of the Bush Doctrine." *Air Force Magazine*, February 2003, pp. 30-37. [Download](#)

Patrick J. Buchanan, "No End to War: The Frum-Perle prescription would ensnare America in endless conflict." *American Conservative* (March 1, 2004). [Download](#)

Patrick Buchanan, "A Republic, Not an Empire." In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 401.

Recommended Reading:

James Mann, *The Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet*. (Viking, 2004).

11.2 Gay Marriage: From Prohibition to Privatization

Matthew Spalding, "A Defining Moment: Marriage, the Courts, and the Constitution." Heritage Foundation Backgrounder #1759 [Download](#)

Peter Sprigg, "What's Wrong with Letting Same Sex Couples Marry?" Family Research Council. [Download](#)

Andrew Sullivan, "Here Comes The Groom: A conservative case for gay marriage." *The New Republic* (August 28, 1989). [Download](#)

Jonathan Rauch, "On Gay Marriage: Conservatives Betray Conservatism." *The Public Interest* (Summer 2004). [Download](#)

David Boaz, "Privatize Marriage: A Simple Solution to the Gay-Marriage Debate." *Slate* (April 24, 1998). [Download](#)

Recommended Reading:

Jonathan Rauch, *Gay Marriage: Why It Is Good for Gays, Good for Straights, and Good for America*. (Owl Books, 2004).

Session 12 The Future of American Conservatism (November 28)

Background

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, chapters 9-15

George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, epilogue.

11.1 In Search of Consensus (Once Again)

Samuel Francis, “Beautiful Losers: Why Conservatism Failed.” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 414.

Paul Weyrich, “An Open Letter to Conservatives.” (In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 428

Policy Review, “What’s Right.” In Gregory L. Schneider, ed, *Conservatism in America Since 1930*, p. 432.

Edwin J. Feulner, “The Future of Conservatism.” *Heritage Foundation*, 2000. [Download](#)

W. James Antle III, “Conservative Crack-Up: Will Libertarians Leave the Cold War Coalition?” *The American Conservative*, November 17, 2003. [Download](#)

Ryan McMaken, “The Return of Fusionism.” 2003 [Download](#)

Recommended Reading:

Andrew Sullivan, *The Conservative Soul: How We Lost It, How to Get It Back*. (HarperCollins (October 10, 2006).

Session 13 Seminar Conclusion and Discussion of Papers (December 5)

Appendix

The material in this seminar raises a number of interesting questions that we should have an opportunity to examine over the course of the semester. These questions should serve as a basis for the required essays. They include the following:

1. To what extent is American conservatism conservative?
2. What are the core differences among competing schools of conservatism? What are the commonalities? Are the differences and the lively debates they engender a source of strength or weakness?
3. Friedrich A. Hayek objects to efforts to portray libertarianism as a variant of conservatism. Is libertarianism best viewed as a form of conservatism or something altogether different?
4. During the 1960s, some conservative intellectuals (most notably Frank S. Meyer) promoted “fusionism,” and attempt to integrate libertarian anti-statism and individualism with the mainstream conservative emphasis on traditional morality. Is fusionism possible? Is a failure of the fusionist project responsible for the deep divisions within the contemporary right?
5. Many claim that the right has won the war of ideas. At first glance, this seems paradoxical given the prevalence of the left in the media and institutions of higher education. How can one explain the right’s growing influence in policy and political debates after decades of liberal dominance?
6. Conservative claims of a culture war seem to be reinforced by the strong support that “people of faith” give to the Republican Party. How can one explain the connection between religiosity and conservatism? Can the Democratic Party succeed if it continues to embrace secularism?
7. History is often shaped by the actions of a single actor. Would the conservative successes of the past few decades have occurred without Ronald Reagan? Is conservatism an elite movement capable of mobilizing the public behind its agenda, or is it a mass movement?
8. In the midst of the Reagan presidency, George A. Panichas decried what he saw as the emergence of “a tinsel, opportunistic, and hedonistic conservatism” that was enamored of “endless ‘policy reviews’ and ‘policy studies,’” but lacked “a basic apprehension of the ‘permanent things’.” What are the tensions between conservatism as a philosophical orientation and as a governing ethos? Are the two compatible?
9. Conservatives in government have challenged (and in some cases reversed) many policies inherited from the New Deal and the Great Society. What were the common

features of the conservative critiques of these domestic policies? Why were they effective?

10. In contemporary political debates, neoconservatism is often portrayed as being synonymous with conservatism as a whole. What is distinctive about neoconservatism? Why do so many conservatives object to its influence in public policy?

11. George W. Bush dramatically expanded the size of the federal government, increased funding for the Department of Education, and engaged in deficit spending and nation-building. Is George W. Bush a conservative? If so, how would you characterize George W. Bush's conservatism (e.g., is it neoconservatism, social conservatism, some heretofore unidentified synthesis)?

12. George W. Bush's doctrine of preemption has raised the concerns of many conservatives. How does the Bush Doctrine differ from the Reagan Doctrine? Why were conservatives seemingly unified in support of the Reagan Doctrine and yet many have proven hesitant to embrace the Bush Doctrine?

13. Should gay marriage be a conservative idea? How can one reconcile the divisions within conservatism on this important issue?

14. Identity is developed through reference to another. Can conservatism continue to flourish without a viable American Left?

15. The past several decades have brought significant economic growth. While conservatives might argue that growth has been a product of conservative victories, one might argue that they have reversed the causality. If this is true, is conservatism dependent on economic growth? Will citizens embrace rhetoric of small government and individual responsibility during periods of economic stagnation or decline?

16. Following the 2004 Democratic Convention, a number of party elites met to chart a new path for the Democratic Party. What, if anything, can the Left learn from the victories of the Right?