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 **What Is Conservatism?**

Conservatism and its modernising, anti-traditionalist rivals, liberalism and socialism, are the most influential political philosophies and ideologies of the post-Enlightenment era. Conservatives criticise their rivals for making a utopian exaggeration of the power of theoretical reason, and of human perfectibility. Conservative prescriptions are based on what they regard as experience rather than reason; for them, the ideal and the practical are inseparable. Most commentators regard conservatism as a modern political philosophy, even though it exhibits the standpoint of paternalism or authority, rather than freedom. As John Gray writes, while liberalism is the dominant political theory of the modern age, conservatism, despite appealing to tradition, is also a response to the challenges of modernity. The roots of all three standpoints “may be traced back to the crises of seventeenth-century England, but [they] crystallised into definite traditions of thought and practice only [after] the French Revolution” (Gray 1995: 78).

It is contested both what conservatism is, and what it could or ought to be—both among the public and politicians, and among the philosophers and political theorists that this article focuses on. Popularly, “conservative” is a generic term for “right-wing viewpoint occupying the political spectrum between liberalism and fascism”. Philosophical commentators offer a more distinctive characterisation. Many treat it as a standpoint that is sceptical of abstract reasoning in politics, and that appeals instead to living tradition, allowing for the possibility of limited political reform. On this view, conservatism is neither dogmatic reaction, nor the right-wing radicalism of Margaret Thatcher or contemporary American “neo-conservatives”. Other commentators, however, contrast this “pragmatic conservatism” with a universalist “rational conservatism” that is not sceptical of reason, and that regards a community with a hierarchy of authority as most conducive to human well-being (Skorupski 2015).

Compared to liberalism and socialism, conservatism has suffered philosophical neglect (Broad 1913: 396–7). Many deny that it is an ideology, or even a political philosophy, regarding it instead as a disposition that resists theoretical expression—a “non-ideology” that attempts to avoid the errors of ideologies (Graham 1986: 172; in contrast, Nisbet 1986). Is it an ancient attitude, or one that developed only in response to Enlightenment rationality and its political products, liberalism and socialism? How is it related to contemporary “neo-conservatism”? Is it a coherent position, or does it, as many have argued, fail to distinguish what is worth conserving from what is not? These are some of the questions commonly raised about conservatism, and explored here.

 The Nature of Conservatism

Conservatism in a broad sense, as a social attitude, has always existed. It expresses the instinctive human fear of sudden change, and tendency to habitual action. Cecil, for instance, contrasts “modern Conservatism” with the “natural conservatism” from which it arises and depends on, found “in almost every human mind” (Cecil, 1912: 8). The arch-royalist and anti-populist Earl of Clarendon, writing the history of the 17th century English Civil War soon after it happened, was instinctively conservative in this broader, un-self-conscious sense. Thus Beiser contrasts the “conservatism [that] had always existed in Germany as a social attitude”, with a self-conscious conservatism that developed as a social force in the 1790s, opposed to the *Aufklärung* or Enlightenment, and in reaction to the French Revolution (Beiser 1992: 281). “Self-conscious” here means not merely implicit in behaviour, but consciously avowed, and ascribed to others. The most distinctive and historically important version of this narrower, self-conscious conservatism rests on scepticism concerning reason in politics.

Various precursors of this self-conscious conservatism have been claimed. Aristotle is often cited, for holding that morality and politics—unlike natural science—lack special experts, and that in these areas, human experience over generations is the main source of knowledge. Confucius is another possible precursor. His concern with the breakdown of contemporary political institutions led to a cautious, conservative political outlook; his stress on authority and hierarchy prefigures central conservative themes. From a later but still pre-Enlightenment era, the English common law notion of precedent, developed by such as Edward Coke (1552–1634), is a clear influence on self-conscious conservatism (Pocock 1989). For Hoppit,

Tory, or what would now be called ‘conservative’, political thought remained alive and well [in England] in the 1690s and 1700s….Thomas Sherlock [wrote] in 1704, ‘To maintain the Establish’d Form of Government, is the First and Highest Duty of Men Acting in Society’. (Hoppit 2000: 196)

David Hume (1711–1776) is sometimes regarded as a conservative. He was a sceptic about reasoning concerning ends as opposed to means, but did not live to see the French Revolution and the arguments underlying it; Dr. Johnson, a true Tory, remarked that he was “a Tory by chance” (reported by Boswell, in Fieser ed. 2005: 290).

The preceding thinkers are proto-conservatives; it is commonly accepted that as a self-conscious standpoint, conservatism came into existence with or after Burke’s critique of the French Revolution (Kirk 1954: 5; Honderich 2005: 6; Nisbet 1986; Claeys 2007: 11–34). The 18th century European Enlightenment aimed to improve the human condition through reform of political institutions. Its thinkers aimed to establish ethical and political principles that appealed to reason rather than established authority or tradition, a “universal ethics independent of historically contingent tradition” (Beveridge and Turnbull 1997: 124). The French Revolution gave powerful expression to this belief, rapidly reinforced by the Industrial Revolution and growth of capitalism. The development of capitalism, followed and revolutionised by industrialisation, led to a process of cultural globalisation (see Bayly 2004: Part I). Everyday experience, conditioned by the diffusion of commodities and ideas, reflected an increasing global standardisation of cultural expression. In the 19th century, the development of communications by the invention of the telegraph, and the growth of news media, popular culture and international travel, led to increasing cultural homogeneity and the appearance of more cosmopolitan ethical outlooks.

As far as the evolution of conservatism is concerned, the French Revolution was key. For many contemporary writers, that Revolution was a liberation of the human spirit, an assertion of reason against irrational feudal authority. The Revolution reflected an Enlightenment attitude towards history, which it regarded not as the inevitable realisation of a divine plan, but as open to direction by enlightened reason, expressed in social and educational reform. Although conservative thinkers opposed the French Revolution, their attitude towards the Enlightenment is debated. Burke, as we will see the leading conservative thinker, is often associated with what Isaiah Berlin called the “Counter-Enlightenment”, but he has also been seen as “an Enlightened figure, who saw himself defending Enlightened Europe against the *gens de lettres* and their revolutionary successors”—it was “one Enlightenment in conflict with another” (Pocock 1999: 7); “Burke was a lifelong student of the Enlightenment who saw in the French Revolution the ultimate threat to…modern, rational, libertarian, enlightened Whig values” (Clark 2001: 108). Bourke comments that historians have

mistaken Burke’s enlightened opposition to doctrinaire attacks on organised religion for a…counter-enlightenment crusade… encouraged by a secular teleology [that reduces] enlightenment to the criticism of religion…Burke’s espousal of sceptical Whiggism and Protestant toleration is curiously reinterpreted as hostile to the very principles of enlightenment he was in fact defending. (Bourke 2014: 28)

Thus the common assumption that conservatism rejects modernity is questioned by Scruton, for whom it “is itself a modernism… [that desires] to live fully in the present, to understand it in all its imperfections” (2007: 194). John Gray comments that Oakeshott’s conservative thought is paradoxical in that he “is in no sense an anti-modernist: If anything, he is an uncompromising modernist, perhaps even a postmodernist” (Gray 2007, Other Internet Resources).

It is important to recognise that the precise appearance of conservatism after 1789 is disputed. For some writers argue, the ideology of conservatism was not articulated until the 1880s and 90s; only then was Burke established as conservatism’s ‘master intellectual’ (Jones 2017). Jones cites MacCunn’s *The Political Philosophy of Burke* (1913), which converted the Whig statesman into the originator of a political philosophy of conservatism. Cecil’s *Conservatism* (1912) firmly established the connection, devoting a chapter to Burke as the founder of conservatism. In contrast, Clark places the appropriation earlier, arguing that “That new creation of the 1830s, ‘conservatism’, adopted Burke as its patron saint…If it was difficult after 1832 to build any systematic political theory around the historical Burke’s principles, the social and political order having changed out of recognition, a Burkean style nevertheless passed into English discourse” (Clark, 2001: 109-10).

### Forms

### Liberal conservatism

[Liberal conservatism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberal_conservatism) incorporates the [classical liberal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_liberal) view of minimal government intervention in the economy. Individuals should be free to participate in the market and generate wealth without government interference.[[8]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservatism#cite_note-FOOTNOTEMcAnulla200671-8) However, individuals cannot be thoroughly depended on to act responsibly in other spheres of life, therefore liberal conservatives believe that a strong state is necessary to ensure law and order and social institutions are needed to nurture a sense of duty and responsibility to the nation.[[8]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservatism#cite_note-FOOTNOTEMcAnulla200671-8) Liberal conservatism is a variant of conservatism that is strongly influenced by [liberal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberalism) stances.[[9]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservatism#cite_note-9)

As these latter two terms have had different meanings over time and across countries, liberal conservatism also has a wide variety of meanings. Historically, the term often referred to the combination of [economic liberalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic_liberalism), which champions [*laissez-faire*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laissez-faire) markets, with the classical conservatism concern for established [tradition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tradition), respect for authority and religious values. It contrasted itself with [classical liberalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_liberalism), which supported [freedom for the individual](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_for_the_individual) in both the economic and social spheres.

Over time, the general conservative ideology in many countries adopted economic liberal argumentsand the term liberal conservatism was replaced with conservatism. This is also the case in countries where liberal economic ideas have been the tradition such as the United States and are thus considered conservative. In other countries where liberal conservative movements have entered the political mainstream, such as [Italy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italy) and [Spain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spain), the terms liberal and conservative may be synonymous. The liberal conservative tradition in the United States combines the economic [individualism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Individualism) of the classical liberals with a [Burkean](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burkean%22%20%5Co%20%22Burkean) form of conservatism (which has also become part of the [American conservative](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_conservative) tradition, such as in the writings of [Russell Kirk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russell_Kirk)).A secondary meaning for the term liberal conservatism that has developed in [Europe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Europe) is a combination of more modern conservative (less traditionalist) views with those of [social liberalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_liberalism). This has developed as an opposition to the more [collectivist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collectivist) views of [socialism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialism). Often this involves stressing what are now conservative views of [free market](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_market) economics and belief in individual responsibility, with social liberal views on defence of [civil rights](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_rights), [environmentalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmentalism) and support for a limited [welfare state](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welfare_state). In continental Europe, this is sometimes also translated into English as social conservatism.

# General Characteristics

A common way of distinguishing [conservatism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservatism) from both [liberalism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/liberalism) and radicalism is to say that [conservatives](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservatives) reject the optimistic view that human beings can be morally improved through political and [social change](https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-change). Conservatives who are [Christians](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity) sometimes express this point by saying that human beings are guilty of [original sin](https://www.britannica.com/topic/original-sin). Skeptical conservatives merely observe that human history, under almost all imaginable political and social circumstances, has been filled with a great deal of evil. Far from believing that [human nature](https://www.britannica.com/topic/human-nature) is essentially good or that human beings are fundamentally rational, conservatives tend to assume that human beings are driven by their passions and desires—and are therefore naturally prone to selfishness, [anarchy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anarchy), irrationality, and violence. Accordingly, conservatives look to traditional political and cultural institutions to curb humans’ base and destructive instincts. In Burke’s words, people need “a sufficient restraint upon their passions,” which it is the office of government “to bridle and subdue.” Families, churches, and schools must teach the value of self-[discipline](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline), and those who fail to learn this lesson must have discipline imposed upon them by government and [law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/law). Without the restraining power of such institutions, conservatives believe, there can be no [ethical behaviour](https://www.britannica.com/topic/ethics-philosophy/Applied-ethics#ref252578) and no responsible use of liberty.

Conservatism is as much a matter of temperament as of doctrine. It may sometimes even accompany left-wing politics or economics—as it did, for example, in the late 1980s, when hard-line communists in the [Soviet Union](https://www.britannica.com/place/Soviet-Union) were often referred to as “conservatives.” Typically, however, the [conservative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservative) temperament displays two characteristics that are scarcely compatible with [communism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/communism). The first is a distrust of human nature, rootlessness (social disconnectedness), and untested [innovations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innovations), together with a corresponding trust in unbroken historical [continuity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/continuity) and in the [traditional](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tradition) frameworks for conducting human affairs. Such frameworks may be political, cultural, or religious, or they may have no abstract or institutional expression at all.

The second characteristic of the conservative temperament, which is closely related to the first, is an [aversion](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aversion) to abstract argument and theorizing. Attempts by philosophers and revolutionaries to plan society in advance, using political principles purportedly derived from [reason](https://www.britannica.com/topic/reason) alone, are misguided and likely to end in disaster, conservatives say. In this respect the conservative temperament contrasts markedly with that of the liberal. Whereas the liberal consciously [articulates](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/articulates) abstract theories, the conservative instinctively embraces concrete traditions. For just this reason, many authorities on conservatism have been led to deny that it is a genuine [ideology](https://www.britannica.com/topic/ideology-society), regarding it instead as a relatively inarticulate state of mind. Whatever the merits of this view, it remains true that the best insights of conservatism seldom have been developed into sustained theoretical works comparable to those of liberalism and radicalism