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**Conservatism**, political doctrine that emphasizes the value of traditional institutions and practices.

Conservatism is a preference for the historically inherited rather than the abstract and ideal. This preference has traditionally rested on an organic conception of society—that is, on the belief that society is not merely a loose collection of individuals but a living organism comprising closely connected, interdependent members. Conservatives thus favour institutions and practices that have evolved gradually and are manifestations of continuity and stability. Government's responsibility is to be the servant, not the master, of existing ways of life, and politicians must therefore resist the temptation to transform society and politics. This suspicion of government activism distinguishes conservatism not only from radical forms of political thought but also from liberalism, which is a modernizing, antitraditionalist movement dedicated to correcting the evils and abuses resulting from the misuse of social and political power. In *The Devil's Dictionary* (1906), the American writer Ambrose Bierce cynically (but not inappropriately) defined the conservative as “a statesman who is enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from the Liberal, who wishes to replace them with others.” Conservatism must also be distinguished from the reactionary outlook, which favours the restoration of a previous, and usually outmoded, political or social order.

It was not until the late 18th century, in reaction to the upheavals of the French Revolution (1789), that conservatism began to develop as a distinct political attitude and movement. The term conservative was introduced after 1815 by supporters of the newly restored Bourbon monarchy in France, including the author and diplomat François-Auguste-René, vicomte de Chateaubriand. In 1830 the British politician and writer John Wilson Croker used the term to describe the British Tory Party (see Whig and Tory), and John C. Calhoun, an ardent defender of states' rights in the United States, adopted it soon afterward. The originator of modern, articulated conservatism (though he never used the term himself) is generally acknowledged to be the British parliamentarian and political writer Edmund Burke, whose *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) was a forceful expression of conservatives' rejection of the French Revolution and a major inspiration for counterrevolutionary theorists in the 19th century. For Burke and other pro-parliamentarian conservatives, the violent, untraditional, and uprooting methods of the revolution outweighed and corrupted its liberating ideals. The general revulsion against the violent course of the revolution provided conservatives with an opportunity to restore pre-Revolutionary traditions, and several brands of conservative philosophy soon developed.

### **Types of conservatism:**

- Cultural Conservatism is a philosophy that supports preservation of the heritage of a nation or culture (or sometimes of language traditions), usually by the adaptation of norms handed down from the past.
- Social Conservatism is a subset of Cultural Conservatism where the norms may also be moral (e.g. opposition to homosexuality, covering of women's faces, etc). In Europe, however, it usually refers to "Liberal" Conservatives, who support modern European welfare states.
- Religious Conservatism seeks to preserve the teachings of particular religious ideologies, either by example or by law. Religious Conservatives may promote broad campaigns for a return to traditional values, or they may go the radical route, looking to preserve a belief in its original or pristine form.

- Fiscal Conservatism is the economic philosophy of prudence in government spending and debt, arguing that a government does not have the right to run up large debts and then throw the burden on the taxpayer.
- Paleo-Conservatism is a moderate to extreme form of Conservatism, popular in the Bible Belt states of the USA, which emphasizes religious heritage, national and Western identity, tradition, civil society, anti-interventionist policies and classical federalism. It specifically opposes illegal immigration, communism, authoritarianism, social democracy and entitlement programs.
- Neo-Conservatism is the "new" Conservative movement which emerged in the United States in opposition to the perceived Liberalism of the 1960s. It emphasizes an interventionist foreign policy, free trade and free market economics and a general disapproval of counterculture.
- Bio-Conservatism is a stance of hesitancy about technological development, and a skepticism about medical and other biotechnological transformations of the living world (e.g. cloning, genetic engineering), especially if it is perceived to threaten a given social order.

### **General Characteristics:**

A common way of distinguishing conservatism from both liberalism and radicalism is to say that conservatives reject the optimistic view that human beings can be morally improved through political and social change. Conservatives who are Christians sometimes express this point by saying that human beings are guilty of 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 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, 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, and those who fail to learn this lesson must have discipline imposed upon them by government and law. Without the restraining power of such institutions, conservatives believe, there can be no ethical behaviour 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.

The second characteristic of the conservative temperament, which is closely related to the first, is an aversion to abstract argument and theorizing. Attempts by philosophers and revolutionaries to plan society in advance, using political principles purportedly derived from 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 articulate abstract theories, the conservative instinctively embraces concrete traditions. In opposition to the “rationalist blueprints” of liberals and radicals, conservatives often insist that societies are so complex that there is no reliable and predictable connection between what governments try to do and what actually happens. It is therefore futile and dangerous, they believe, for governments to interfere with social or economic realities as happens, for example, in government attempts to control wages, prices, or rents.

Conservative influences operate indirectly i.e., other than via the programs of political parties largely by virtue of the fact that there is much in the general human temperament that is naturally or instinctively conservative, such as the fear of sudden change and the tendency to act habitually. These traits may find collective expression in, for example, a resistance to imposed political change and in the entire range of convictions and preferences that contribute to the stability of a particular culture. In all societies, the existence of such cultural restraints on political innovation constitutes a fundamental conservative bias, the implications of which were aphoristically expressed by the 17th-century English statesman Viscount Falkland: “If it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change.” Mere inertia, however, has rarely sufficed to protect conservative values in an age dominated by rationalist dogma and by social change related to continuous technological progress. Although conservatives sometimes claim philosophers as ancient as Aristotle and Cicero as their forebear, the first explicitly conservative political theorist is generally considered to be Edmund Burke.

### **Conservatism Since The Turn Of The 20th Century:**

The Allied victory in World War I resulted in the downfall of four great imperial dynasties—those in Russia, Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Ottoman Turkey—that were the last major bastions of conservatism based on monarchy, landed aristocracy,

and an established church. After the war, conservative parties became the standard-bearers of frustrated nationalism in Germany as well as in Italy and other former Allied countries. In a process that began in the 1930s and intensified during World War II, conservative parties across central and eastern Europe were destroyed or co-opted by the totalitarian regime of Nazi Germany.

European conservative parties began to recover their strength only after 1946, and then only in western Europe, since Soviet power had extirpated all conservative political organizations in eastern Europe. To the chagrin of western European socialists, conservative parties—or, more commonly, Christian Democratic parties in which various moderate and conservative elements had coalesced—began to win elections in West Germany and other countries. After the defeat of the fascist regimes, and given socialism's apparent inability to speedily rebuild shattered postwar economies, many Europeans turned once more to conservative policies, which seemed to promise both economic growth and democratic freedoms. This revived conservatism was by now completely shorn of its old aristocratic associations. Instead, it emphasized the raising of living standards through a market economy and the provision of a wide array of social services by the state. For the rest of the century conservative parties were characterized by liberal individualism tinged with a strong sense of social conscience—as well as by an implacable opposition to communism.

### **Legacy And Prospects**

Division, not unity, marked conservatism around the world during the first decades of the 21st century—this despite the defeat of conservatism's chief nemesis of the previous 50 years, Soviet communism. But perhaps this fissure is not surprising. Anticommunism was the glue that held the conservative movement together, and without this common enemy the many differences between conservatives became all too painfully clear. In Europe, for example, conservatives split over issues such as the desirability of a united Europe, the advantages of a single European currency (the euro, introduced in the countries of the European Union in 2002), and the region's proper role in policing troubled areas such as the Balkans and the Middle East.

Conservatism was even more divided in the United States. Abortion, immigration, national sovereignty, "family values," and the "war on terror," both at home and abroad, were among the issues that rallied supporters but divided adherents into

various camps, from neoconservatives and “paleoconservatives” (descendants of the Old Right, who regarded neoconservatives as socially liberal and imperialistic in foreign affairs) to cultural traditionalists among “religious right” groups such as the Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family. The camps battled one another as well as their perceived enemies in periodic “culture wars” from the 1990s through the first decades of the 21st century. By the time of the Congressional elections of 2006 and the presidential election of 2008, however, it was clear that such infighting had taken its toll. Two military invasions and occupations abroad, in Afghanistan and Iraq, had proved enormously expensive in American lives and treasure and cast doubt on the wisdom of the neoconservatives’ call for a more interventionist U.S. foreign policy backed by military might. While American conservatives had long called for smaller government, balanced budgets, and leaving education to the states, the policies of the putatively conservative George W. Bush administration contradicted those key tenets of conservatism. And the global economic crisis that began in 2007–08, during the final year of the Bush administration, turned Americans’ attention away from cultural issues such as same-sex marriage and toward more material concerns (the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage throughout the country in 2015; see *Obergefell v. Hodges*). The “new New Deal” introduced by Democratic Pres. Barack Obama’s administration (2009–17) angered and upset many conservatives, whose ranks nevertheless remained divided. Conservatives were again divided by the policies and personality of Republican Pres. Donald Trump (2017– ), who gave voice to a dedicated core of generally right-wing supporters but who was viewed by some other conservatives as a would-be authoritarian.

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