POLITICAL THEORY

Conservatism

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • June 16, 2026 • 10 min read

François-René de Chateaubriand first used the term “conservatism” in 1818 during the Bourbon Restoration to counter the momentum of the French Revolution. As a political ideology, conservatism represents a school of thought that desires to preserve established institutions and political systems, maintaining a deep skepticism toward rapid or sweeping change.

The essence of this mindset is well-captured by political philosopher Michael Oakeshott:

> *“To be conservative… is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, and the near to the distant.”*

Historically associated with right-wing politics, conservatism draws inspiration from the Hobbesian view of the human state of nature. Key tenets of the ideology include:

- **Support for tradition:** Valuing historical continuity and established customs.
- **Belief in human imperfection:** Recognizing the inherent flaws and limitations of human nature.
- **Organic society:** A commitment to upholding the natural, interdependent structure of society.

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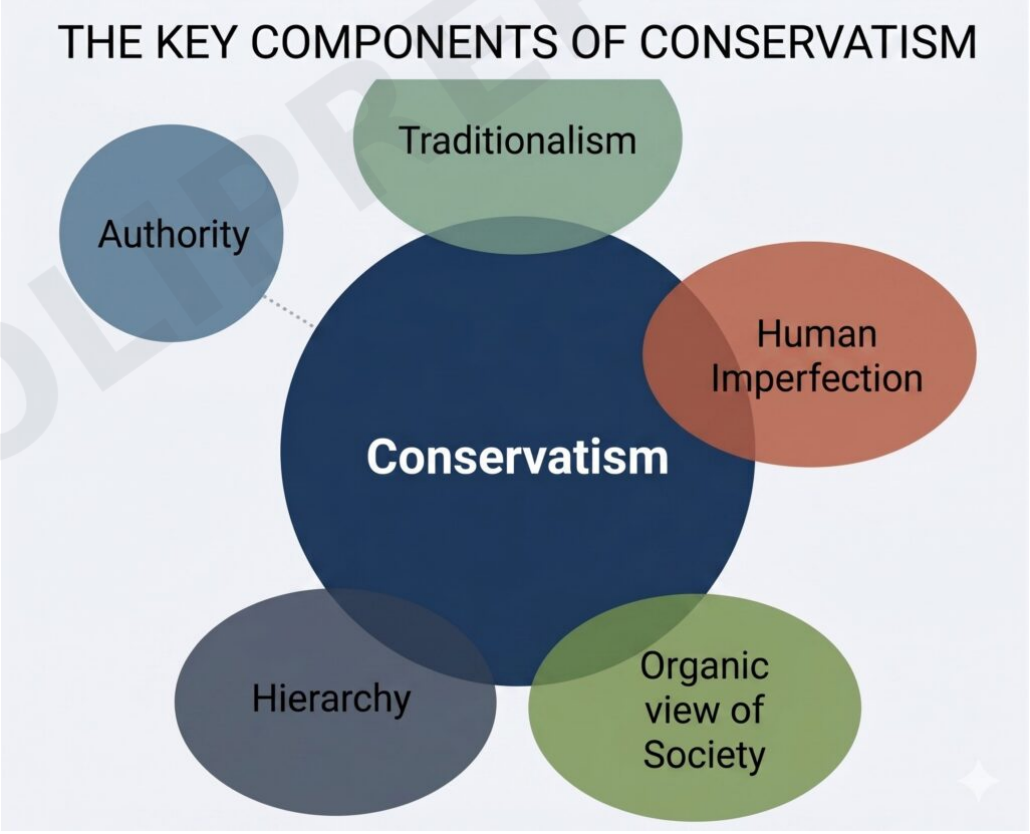
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Origin of Conservatism

During the 19th century, conservative philosophy developed in Europe as a reaction against the changes and reforms introduced by modern political ideologies like liberalism and socialism. Conservatism directly challenged the French Revolutionary principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, standing instead in defense of an authoritative and traditional socio-political order.

The perspective of modern conservatism was heavily influenced by the ideas of Edmund Burke. He advocated against a blind, reactionary resistance to change; instead, he promoted a prudent willingness to “change in order to conserve”. Although conservatism is fundamentally not a progressive ideology, it has enduringly established itself as a major, influential trend in political parties around the world.

Components of Conservatism



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Tradition

- A fundamental pillar of conservatism is its steadfast defense of tradition. This focus is often deeply rooted in religious faith; if the world is believed to have been fashioned by a creator, traditional societal customs and practices are naturally viewed as “God-given”. In this context, tradition represents the accumulated wisdom of history. Because historical institutions and practices have been tested by time, conservatives argue they must be preserved for the benefit of both current and future generations. Edmund Burke, for instance, characterized society as a profound partnership between the living, the dead, and those yet to be born.
- Today, this adherence to tradition has fueled the rise of “National Conservatism,” which embraces a right-leaning communitarian culture that is firmly based on state religion and traditionalist family values. Modern conservative parties heavily advocate for the preservation of Christian social norms, such as opposite-sex marriage, while actively resisting sudden, radical progressive policies. Furthermore, recent conservative platforms emphasize national pride and the upholding of fundamental historical values—such as decency, democracy, and service—as essential for a secure future.

Human Imperfection

- O’Sullivan describes conservatism as a “philosophy of human imperfection”. Drawing on the Hobbesian view of a flawed human nature, this concept serves as a theoretical foundation to counter movements of radical reform and revolution. Because conservative thinkers place little trust in human rational capability, they prefer to maintain older, time-tested institutions and societal structures rather than risking the unknown.
- In contemporary politics, this epistemological skepticism is often directed toward technocrats and “rationalist” social engineers. Modern conservatism exhibits a strong populist thrust that is highly critical of global elites and transnational institutions. Conservatives argue against “artificial” or top-down changes forced by a small number of political planners, viewing such progressive engineering as out of touch with the flawed realities of human nature.

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Organic Society: Doing One’s Duty

- Conservatives view human beings as dependent creatures who seek security and fundamentally cannot thrive outside of a societal structure. An individual is shaped and nurtured by various interconnected social groups, including family, friends, peer groups, colleagues, local communities, and the broader nation. From a conservative perspective, a society focused solely on individual rights—without a corresponding acknowledgement of duties—inevitably becomes rootless and atomistic. Therefore, it is the vital bonds of duty and mutual obligation that hold society together and ultimately ensure true liberty.
- Modern movements reiterate that for an organic society to function, change must be “demand-driven” and bottom-up—arising organically from large populations over time—rather than artificially mandated. Recent conservative platforms heavily prioritise the family unit and argue that local communities must be empowered to decide their own priorities, rather than having policies imposed on them from above by centralised authorities.

Hierarchy and Authority

- Traditionally, conservatives maintain the belief that society is naturally hierarchical. Consequently, they reject strict social equality as both undesirable and impossible to achieve, noting that power, status, and property are inherently distributed unequally. Within an organic society, inequality is seen as an inevitable feature. As Burke stated, liberty must be intimately connected with order and virtue; it cannot exist at all without them. This acceptance of hierarchy is heavily reinforced by the conservative emphasis on authority. Conservatives argue that authority, much like society itself, develops organically, leading to an ideology that represents strong paternalistic values.
- In the 2020s, this belief in hierarchy and authority has evolved significantly within hard-right factions. Movements like national conservatism now openly favour authoritarian leaders who seek to forcefully concentrate state and executive power to realise their political and sociocultural ends. This includes detailed, modern frameworks designed to dismantle entrenched left-liberal civil service structures—often labelled the “Deep

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State”—by installing loyalist personnel and expanding presidential protections to enforce a new conservative order.

Types of Conservatism

Authoritarian Conservatism

- Authoritarianism relies on the practice of government “from above”, where authority is exercised over a population with or without its consent. Historically, authoritarian conservatism wished to restore absolute power to hereditary monarchies. For example, Tsar Nicholas I of Russia propagated the ideology of “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality” as a direct challenge to the French Revolution’s principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Thinkers and leaders like Joseph de Maistre, António de Oliveira Salazar, and Engelbert Dollfuss historically represented this ideology. Unlike other radical movements of their eras, authoritarian conservatives utilised traditional religion as the foundation for their views and forcibly suppressed revolutionary enemies.
- In contemporary politics, authoritarian conservatism has experienced a global resurgence, increasingly relying on the distortion of deliberative legislative processes to consolidate partisan power. Modern authoritarian conservative leaders often rule from the hard right, embracing doctrines like the “unitary executive theory” to bypass traditional checks and balances and enforce an ideological agenda. This modern shift is exemplified by the consolidation of illiberal state models championed by figures like Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Nayib Bukele in El Salvador.

Traditional Conservatism

- Also known as classical conservatism, this branch emphasises the importance of transcendent moral principles, customs, conventions, and traditions. Traditionalists passionately defend classical Western civilisation and are deeply committed to hierarchic and paternalistic values. Philosopher Michael Oakeshott is widely regarded as one of the most important proponents of traditionalism.

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- Today, traditional conservatives have built expansive, coordinated international networks—frequently gathering at events like the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC)—to defend their vision of a civilisational world order. They increasingly view themselves as a unified global movement fighting against the perceived cultural threats posed by progressive liberals and globalists.

Paternalistic Conservatism

- Paternalism literally translates to acting in a “fatherly” fashion. As a political principle, it refers to power or authority being exercised over others with the specific intention of conferring a benefit or preventing harm. State-sponsored social welfare programmes and safety laws, such as the compulsory wearing of seat belts in cars, are classic examples of paternalistic conservatism.

Liberal Conservatism and the New Right

- Historically, libertarian conservatives believed in strict economic individualism and getting the government off the back of business, though they were less prepared to extend this principle of individual liberty to other aspects of social life. Retaining a pessimistic view of human nature, they argued that a strong state is required to maintain public order and ensure that authority is respected. The late 20th-century “New Right” emerged as a marriage between two apparently contrasting ideological traditions: classical liberal economics (such as the free-market theories of Adam Smith) and a traditional conservative defence of order, authority, and discipline.
- The “New Right” has undergone a radical transformation in the 2020s. The modern New Right has largely abandoned the liberal consensus of the last eight decades, explicitly rejecting its former faith in open markets, free trade, and economic globalisation. Instead, it has evolved into a hyper-modern, digitally savvy movement that pushes a “national conservative” revolution. Modern theoreticians of the New Right, such as Yoram Hazony, argue that liberal individualism atomises society and destroys critical collective identities like the family, tribe, and nation.

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Neo-Conservatism

- Originating as a distinct ideology during the 1970s in the United States, neo-conservatism represents the combination of political individualism with traditional conservative values. Early neo-conservatives believed that modern societal crises stemmed directly from the declining influence of culture and religion. The movement initially formed as a robust counter-ideology to communism and Stalinism. Key intellectuals include Irving Kristol, Francis Fukuyama, and Nathan Glazer.
- In the current political landscape, traditional neoconservatism has lost significant influence to the paleoconservative and nationalist factions of the radical right. The neoconservative legacy of democracy promotion and economic globalisation is now heavily criticised by modern populist conservatives, who view those policies as detrimental to national sovereignty, traditional values, and local communities.

Important Thinkers in Conservatism

Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821)

- **Ideological Stance:** He developed an extreme, reactionary version of the ideology often referred to as Latin conservatism.
- **Core Beliefs:** De Maistre strongly advocated for the restoration of the hereditary monarchy and asserted the ultimate authority of the Church over the state. Standing in direct opposition to the French Revolutionary slogan of “liberty, equality, and fraternity”, he famously championed the foundational value of “throne and altar”.
- **Notable Work:** *Considerations on France* (1796)

Edmund Burke (1729–1797)

- **Ideological Stance:** Widely recognised as the father of both Anglo-American and modern conservatism, Burke is associated with a pragmatic willingness to “change in order to conserve”.

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- **Core Beliefs:** He fundamentally opposed the French Revolutionary concept of the abstract “universal rights of man”. Instead, Burke argued that true political wisdom resides primarily in lived experience, established tradition, and the continuity of history.
- **Notable Works:**
  - *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756)
  - *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)

Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990)

- **Ideological Stance:** A prominent defender of traditionalism, Oakeshott decisively rejected the idea of political rationalism.
- **Core Beliefs:** He argued in favour of traditional values and established customs, asserting that abstract political theories are inadequate substitutes for practical knowledge. He famously defined the conservative disposition as an inherent tendency “to prefer the familiar to the unknown”.
- **Notable Works:**
  - *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (1962)
  - *On Human Conduct* (1975)

Friedrich von Hayek (1899–1992)

- **Ideological Stance:** Though formally aligned with classical liberalism, Hayek profoundly influenced the conservative New Right as a firm believer in individualism and spontaneous market order and as an implacable critic of socialism.
- **Core Beliefs:** “Hayekian liberalism” describes a social and institutional system designed to support and protect a free society. Commenting on the political shifts of his era, Hayek noted: *“Since the development during the last decades has been generally in a socialist direction, it may seem that both conservatives and liberals have been mainly intent on retarding that movement.”*

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- **Notable Works:**
  - *The Road to Serfdom* (1944)
  - *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960)
  - *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (1979)

Irving Kristol (1920–2009)

- **Ideological Stance:** Universally known as the “Godfather of Neo-conservatism”.
- **Core Beliefs:** Kristol famously abandoned liberalism in the 1970s, becoming increasingly critical of the expansive spread of state welfarism and the liberal “counterculture” of the era. His philosophy sought to integrate a strong defence of free-market capitalism with the preservation of traditional morality.
- **Notable Works:**
  - *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (1978)
  - *Reflections of a Neoconservative* (1983)

Important Thinkers, Key Concepts, and Famous Books

Thinker	Key Concepts / Specialty	Famous Books (Publication Year)
Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821)	**Latin Conservatism:** Advocated for the restoration of hereditary monarchy and Church authority over the state. Coined the value of “throne and altar” to oppose the French Revolution.	• *Considerations on France* (1796)
Edmund Burke (1729–1797)	**Anglo-American/Modern Conservatism:** Supported a pragmatic willingness to “change in order to conserve.” Opposed the abstract “universal rights of man,” arguing wisdom resides in experience and tradition.	• *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756) • *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)

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Thinker	Key Concepts / Specialty	Famous Books (Publication Year)
Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990)	**Traditionalism:** Rejected political rationalism in favor of established customs. Defined the conservative disposition as preferring “the familiar to the unknown.”	• *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (1962) • *On Human Conduct* (1975)
Friedrich von Hayek (1899–1992)	**New Right/Classical Liberalism:** Firm believer in individualism and spontaneous market order. An implacable critic of socialism whose ideas heavily influenced modern conservative economics.	• *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) • *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960) • *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (1979)
Irving Kristol (1920–2009)	**Neo-Conservatism:** Known as the “Godfather of Neo-Conservatism.” Criticized welfarism and the liberal counterculture, integrating free-market capitalism with the preservation of traditional morality.	• *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (1978) • *Reflections of a Neoconservative* (1983)

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