Understanding American Political Conservatism

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Abstract

This essay examines contemporary American political conservatism from a variety of angles. It asks first what scholars and activists mean by conservative. It then turns to controversies about the meaning of the term to the general public and to the question of whether the United States is a conservative nation and, if so, how this came about. A central theme here is that the increasing link of conservative self-identification and party identification grew out of reactions to events in the 1960s and early 1970s and that increased partisan polarization along ideological grounds, particularly in the South, has had a large impact on American politics at all levels (elite and general public) of the polity. After a brief look at the Tea Party phenomenon and its implications, the essay closes with a discussion of the future of American conservatism, with emphasis on the ability of conservative factions to coalesce, the evolving relationship between conservative self-identification and issues attitudes, and the likelihood that political polarization will endure.

INTRODUCTION

Conservatism is a vital force in contemporary American politics. From electoral campaigns to talk shows in the media to debates in the popular and academic literature, conservatism is a topic of discussion and controversy. This essay examines American political conservatism from a variety of angles. It asks first what conservatism is. What exactly do scholars and activists mean by words like conservative? Is there general agreement on the meaning of the term? If not, what are the meanings and what are the implications of varying definitions. I then turn to a second set of related questions: What do people in the general public mean when they call themselves conservatives? How meaningful is public opinion on conservatism? Third, is the United States a conservative nation? And, if so, what has caused this? Fourth, how different are elites and the public? Is conservatism, whatever it may mean, just an elite phenomenon, or is it important for the public also? Fifth, what is the

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meaning of contemporary movements like the Tea Party? Finally, where do we go from here? What are some of the major questions for future research?

Due to space limitations, the essay focuses on conservatism in the general public and among selected political elites. It only very briefly touches on the role of conservative think tanks, media, and major donors, but clearly these are also key areas for those seeking a comprehensive understanding of the influence of conservatism in American political life.

WHAT IS CONSERVATISM?

There is, to put it plainly, no agreement about how to define conservatism. Indeed, a part of the politics of conservatism—especially at the elite level—focuses on what should or should not be categorized as conservative. What I do here is look at some of the ways conservatism is conceptualized by scholars and proponents, and at what those in the contemporary general public apparently mean when they call themselves conservatives.

Few would disagree with Clinton Rossiter (1962, p. 16) that Edmund Burke's 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France* "is rightly considered the first and greatest statement of consciously conservative principles." Samuel Huntington (1957), in a classic article, lays out a set of basic elements that underlie Burkean conservatism. It is a practical approach to life and to government, with a bias toward favoring institutions and practices that have evolved over time, a strong respect for religion as a major foundation of society, an organic view of society, and a general notion that experience is far superior to theory as a guide to policy and appropriate behavior. Burkean conservatism is not reactionary, in that it accepts that change may come, but change should be based on cautious experience. As Chris Patten, writing in this tradition, puts it: "Seeking to conserve the best of the past, trying neither to preserve everything nor to prevent the arrival of tomorrow, is the hallmark of a Conservative" (Patten, 1983, p. 17).

Many American politicians would be broadly classified as conservatives in the Burkean tradition—think of Robert Taft, Dwight Eisenhower, and Robert Dole—but the conservative label has been appropriated by others as well who often have more dogmatic views. The list would surely include *libertarians,* focused on individual liberty in both the economic and social spheres; *fiscal conservatives*, who emphasize cutting taxes and shrinking the size and reach of government; *religious conservatives*—sometimes called *theocons* or the *Religious Right*—who see traditional religion and conventional morals as the central elements of conservatism; *social conservatives*—often inseparable from the religious right—who emphasize traditional values, religion, and family life; *neoconservatives* (neocons), originally a group of ex-liberals with strong anticommunist and militant foreign policy views who have morphed into a

more conventionally conservative group on economic issues while retaining a predilection toward assertive diplomacy and the use of force in foreign relations; and *compassionate conservatives*, with their emphasis on private sector volunteerism to aid the unfortunate (abetted by government organizations and incentives as well as by limited expansions of the welfare state such as the Part D drug benefit passed under the George W. Bush administration). The list could be longer and the ideas often overlap, but the point is that there are numerous factions in American conservatism. They were brought together, particularly through an appeal to their anti-Communism, by a concept called *fusionism*. Fusionism is identified with Frank Meyer, of the conservative magazine *National Review* (Nash, 2007, p. 6), and played a role in the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980, but there is constant tension among conservatives at the elite level over principle and practice. In short, the type of cautious, undogmatic, and highly practical types who the Burkes and Pattens of the world might think of as genuine conservatives have been joined by an often raucous group of highly committed people who identify as conservatives but differ from Burkeans in their stronger commitment to doctrine and their willingness, indeed often eagerness, to make radical changes in government and society.

WHAT DO PEOPLE IN THE GENERAL PUBLIC MEAN WHEN THEY CALL THEMSELVES CONSERVATIVES?

While American political elites may use terms such as neoconservative or religious right in a meaningful way, that would be a lot to expect of most citizens (Converse, 1964). A useful future study might test this by checking how able citizens are to make such distinctions, but for the moment it is useful to look at the correlates of conservative self-identification as measured by people's placement on a seven-point scale used in the American National Election Studies (ANES) that run from "extremely liberal" at one end to "extremely conservative" at the other. Such a relatively simple exercise is particularly interesting in light of an excellent recent study that examines American ideology using data from the General Social Survey, which employs a measure of liberalism/conservatism similar to the one on the ANES surveys (Ellis & Stimson, 2012). The results of the study indicate that "the United States is a nation of both the left and the right," with Americans having a strong affection for the "symbols of conservatism" and a particular affinity for the word "conservative," but when it comes to "concrete views" on public policy, there is, on average, an "affinity for solutions of the left" (Ellis & Stimson, 2012, p. 11). As the authors note, that is not a new finding (e.g., Free & Cantril, 1967; Jacobs & Shapiro, 1999), but it does call into question the meaning of findings about the predilection toward conservatism of the American public

(e.g., Aberbach, 2011, p. 45). The authors put special emphasis on cultural conservatives, postulating that "millions of Americans who know that they are religious conservatives or that they approve of a 'conservative' approach to child rearing and family life are simultaneously confused by what 'conservative' means in politics" (Ellis & Stimson, 2012, p. 133).

Ellis and Stimson's provocative statement brings to the fore a set of questions and avenues of exploration for students of American conservatism. First, thinking back to Burkean notions of conservatism, religion is central to a conservative orientation, at least historically. Traditional conservatives may not be observant, but they see religion as a foundation of society. In that sense, among others, religion is important politically and one would logically expect a disproportionate number of religious people to think of themselves as conservatives. Second, traditional conservatives would not necessarily reject many of the policies of the welfare state, especially those well established over the years. British Tories of the pre-Thatcher period regularly embraced such policies (e.g., Patten, 1983) as did many conservative political leaders in the United States. Third, it is worthwhile to examine how much the professed conservatism of religious Americans influences their political behavior. If it does, and in the direction one might expect—say identifying with the more conservative of the two parties, or voting for the more conservative of the candidates running—then one might want to reconsider, and perhaps modify, the notion that religious conservatives are somehow politically confused.

I did a preliminary examination of the importance of conservatism in determining the vote. Perhaps, as argued by Ellis and Stimson, it is the case that many people who say they are conservative simply give this answer because they think it means that they are religious. In short, once one knows that they are religious, there should be little impact of their professed level of conservatism on their political choice because they would have conflated the terms and what is left would be a lot of random noise and measurement error when it comes to the relationship between a measure of conservatism and political choice; religiosity alone should account for the person's choice. Testing this using data from the 2008 and 2012 ANES is revealing. Religious respondents were, as predicted, much more likely than nonreligious respondents to identify as conservatives and also to vote for the more conservative of the two candidates for president of the United States (McCain in 2008 and Romney in 2012). And, not surprisingly, conservative identifiers were much more likely to vote for McCain or Romney in the 2 years. However, there was also a strong relationship between degree of conservatism and the vote within categories of the religiosity measures I used. This suggests that the term *conservative* is not merely a synonym for religious people, although religious people do

definitely tend to be more conservative. Notions of conservatism and liberalism are strong enough that they drive vote choice in a meaningful way, even showing a consistent and high impact when there is a conflict between the normal choices of those who are religious and their position on the conservatism scale. And, it follows that the indicator of conservatism that ANES and others use to measure the degree of conservatism is politically meaningful to survey respondents who provide much of the basic data we have on conservatism in the general public.

What other variables correlate with indicators of conservatism in the general public? This question has been investigated in many forms over the years. As noted previously (Free & Cantril, 1967; Jacobs & Shapiro, 1999), one major finding has been that Americans tend to be "philosophical conservatives" but "operational liberals." However, other studies indicate greater penetration of more coherent ideological thinking, especially in recent years. For example, Abramowitz and Saunders (2008, p. 547), using ANES surveys, show a marked increase in the relationship between partisanship and a variety of political issues over the period from 1972 to 2004. Carmines and Stanley (1992), writing in an earlier period, focused on what they termed *ideological polarization*, and found that ideological divergence (as measured by the liberalism–conservatism question) of partisans changed markedly over the years they examined (1972–1988). They conclude (p. 236): "the evidence suggests that the white electorate has undergone a major ideological transformation during recent decades. It is not that the proportion of conservatives has increased sharply; the increase has actually been quite modest. But what has changed is the connection between ideology and partisanship. Once loosely connected, ideology and partisanship are now much more tightly bound together, and this close connection has rebounded to the benefit of Republicans."

I shall return to the political advantages of the increasing link between ideology and partisanship in the following section, but will close here with a brief consideration of the types of ideologues, particularly conservative ideologues, that are found in the general public and more generally with what tends to correlate with self-identified conservatism.

One would think that developing a typology to identify the percentages of the public falling into various ideological configurations in the general public would be a relatively easy task, and in some ways it is, but lurking behind these typologies are important judgments. Ellis and Stimson (2012, p. 96), for example, find that only about 15% of the public are "consistent conservatives." This is based on their notion that consistent conservatives would want to cut expenditures on a majority of government programs, and compares to close to 30% who are rated consistently liberal. Another 30 or so percent are categorized as "operationally liberal, symbolically conservative."

As I argued previously, however, this sort of typology rests on a particular definition of conservatism that would not necessarily be shared by others, thus one must be careful to examine how such conclusions are reached, as whether one agrees with the operational definition of what make someone a particular type of liberal or conservative is central to interpreting the finding. Or, to take another example, Michael Tanner, a Cato Institute Senior Fellow—Cato is a libertarian think tank in Washington—cites survey data suggesting that a majority of American voters lean in a libertarian direction, describing themselves as "fiscally conservative and socially liberal" (Tanner, 2011, p. 270, based on Boaz & Kirby, 2007). This contrasts to the relatively low percentage of voters usually classified as libertarian (about 15%), as Boaz and Kirby indicate through their own estimates at other places in the same paper. The point is not what the actual percentage is, but that the conceptualization as well as the survey items used can have a significant impact on estimates of the level and meaning of American conservatism, something particularly important to keep in mind in studying a contentious subject such as political ideology.

One thing that is clear is that the general item on conservatism in the ANES studies is strongly correlated with a set of other variables and that the many of the relationships have grown stronger over the years. Demographically, people who self-identify as conservatives are more likely to be married or widowed (as opposed to never married or divorced), men (although the relationship is not strong), southern (again the regional differences are relatively modest), and on the older side. Socially, they are religious, antichoice, have a lower tolerance than nonconservatives of people with different moral standards, oppose such policies as affirmative action in the hiring and promotion of blacks, and tend to oppose gay marriage. As the philosophically conservative but operationally liberal portrayal of Americans implies, professed conservatives are much more likely than liberals to think that the government is too big, spends too much on services, and opposes government guarantees of citizens' jobs or standard of living. However, while they favor less government spending in principle and oppose *proposed* social service or benefit, they have, traditionally, been about as likely as liberals to favor government programs such as Social Security and spending in areas such as science and technology and the environment. As I said earlier, the latter positions are easily reconciled with what many have meant by conservatism in the past, but they do not fit well with the more doctrinaire fiscally conservative position of many contemporary conservative activists and politicians. For good or ill, however, the most recent data indicate a growing link between conservative self-identification in the general public and greater fiscal conservatism or, at least, unwillingness to spend more public funds even on popular public

programs. They also show, as noted earlier, a marked increase over time in the linkage of conservative self-identification and religiosity as well as a large increase in the relationship between attitudes on such issues as abortion and conservatism. The point is twofold: Conservatism at the mass public level is dynamic rather than static and, relatedly, recent trends indicate that the attitudinal configuration of conservatives is becoming more structured over time.

IS THE UNITED STATES A CONSERVATIVE NATION?

All that have been said so far lead to two obvious questions: First, is the United States a conservative nation? And, second, if it is, what has caused this?

Assuming that one accepts the ANES measure of an individual's conservatism and those like it as legitimate indicators of public sentiment, the answer to the first question is, at minimum, a qualified "yes." The yes and the qualification are based on the fact that since the question was first asked in 1972, a plurality of respondents has consistently chosen one of the options on the conservative end of the scale (over 40%), with the middle of the road option second, and the liberal options third. Conservative, in other words, is the modal public position, but not the majority position. However, in keeping with the earlier discussion, one should always question the indicator. Here also, there are reasons to accept the finding. First, the indicator has face validity. Second, in surveys where the question is asked of the same respondents several months apart, the correlation between answers is very high (above 0.80), so the indicator is clearly reliable. Third, conservatism is related to a whole set of other indicators—see the summary aforementioned—that fit a general pattern. Fourth, as indicated by the discussion earlier in this essay on the strong relationship of the conservative self-identification measure to vote even with religiosity controlled, the notion that political conservatism is chosen by religious respondents who do not know what conservative may mean in politics is, at minimum, open to question. And, finally, the fact that the ties between the conservatism scale and other variables have either remained steady or increased in predictable ways over time suggests that those in the general public who answer the question are not typically confused or stabbing in the dark when they position themselves. For these reasons, among others, I am confident that the indicator is basically capturing what we are after and that the consistent results lead to the conclusion that the nation tilts right of center in it basic philosophy, fully understanding that there are inconsistencies in many people's views and that the complex and variegated meanings of

conservatism guarantee that even the most sophisticated will not necessarily agree on what it means to be a conservative.

But was it always so? What has made the conservative label so important politically? These are obviously complex questions, but a few relatively simple points are suggestive. First, while we do not have as reliable a set of indicators pre-1972, we know that in the period before the mid-1960s, respondents, particularly white respondents, were much more evenly split between conservatism and liberalism when categorizing themselves than in the period afterward. In other words, there are clear suggestions of a reaction in much of the public to the various events of the 1960s and early 1970s that pushed the modal response by individuals in a conservative direction. Second, and in some ways more important, there has been a marked change in the link between conservative self-identification and party identification in the period covered by the ANES ideology measure. This is the case nationwide, but especially in the South. If one looks at the average rank-order correlation (Gamma) between the two measures, they have gone from an average just below 0.30 in the South in the period 1972–1992, to just below 0.50 from 1994 to 2002, to over 0.60 since 2004.[1] The pattern of increase holds in the rest of the country, but the relationship between conservatism and party identification was higher outside the South in the initial period. In brief, the level of conservatism in the country may have been steady (and high) since 1972, but the political significance of that conservatism has changed; especially in the South, many of those who once called themselves conservatives, but supported and voted for Democrats, are now supporting and voting for Republicans.

The triumph of the Republican Party as a conservative force in the South has had a profound impact on American politics. Where once southern Democrats were a pivotal force in the bargaining that produced lawmaking (e.g., Katznelson & Mulroy, 2012), both influencing policy content and providing pivotal votes for the passage of bills, that group has diminished in size (although become more liberal) and has been replaced by a large group of legislators who now often hold key positions in the Republican Party. The three-party system of Republicans, southern Democrats, and northern Democrats has been replaced by a fiercely partisan two-party system—a polarized system—that has changed the tenor and, often, the outcome of political debates in the United States. In short, the political significance of conservative identification in the United States has changed in ways that make the fact of conservative self-identification by so many a force with an increased impact on national political life.

1. African-American respondents were not included in these calculations because African-Americans almost are uniformly identified as Democrats.

HOW DIFFERENT ARE POLITICAL ELITES AND THE PUBLIC?

There is a fierce debate in political science about the contemporary level of political polarization in the United States. One side, identified with the work of Morris Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2005), holds that polarization among the public is vastly overstated. Polarization, in this view, is an elite phenomenon that has distorted American political life and given the United States a severely divided politics that is not reflective of the moderate opinion typical in the American public. The other side, reflected in the work of such scholars as Abramowitz (2006), Campbell (2006), and Jacobson (2006), argues that there is widespread division at most levels in the country.

In part, as I argue in a chapter on "The Future of the American Right" (Aberbach, 2011, p. 62) recapped here, this is a debate about degree, but Fiorina *et al*. (2005) go so far as to say that while elites may now be polarized, "public opinion data … provide little reason to believe that elites are following voters. Rather they are imposing their own agendas on the electorate" (Fiorina *et al*., 2005, p. 88). Alan Abramowitz (2006), a mainstay of the other side, finds increased polarization over time. And, in what is probably the best synthesis, Marc J. Hetherington (2008, p. 29) writes that "elite polarization has stimulated participation at the mass level even though the masses remain relatively moderate."

The bottom line, to the degree one can have one in an ongoing argument, is that both elites and the public are increasingly divided on ideological grounds in their political behavior and that, as one might expect, political elites are more strongly and consistently divided than the general public. With regard to the general public, whether one calls it "sorting," as Fiorina and his colleagues do, or "polarization," as many others do, there has definitely been movement toward a more ideologically driven politics at all levels.

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF CONTEMPORARY MOVEMENTS LIKE THE TEA PARTY?

The Tea Party emerged on the scene in 2009, ostensibly with a rant on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange by CNBC reporter Rick Santelli who called for a "Chicago Tea Party" to protest government plans to "subsidize the losers' mortgages" (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012, p. 7). The reaction across the country was huge, clearly stimulated in part by conservative media and later aided by infusions of funds from major donors (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012, pp. 9–10; Zernike, 2010, p. 43), and resulted in the formation of a loosely structured movement whose three main principles, according to a

sympathetic analyst, are to promote "limited government," "unapologetic US sovereignty," and "constitutional originalism" (Foley, 2012, p. 19).

Skocpol and Williamson (2012, p. 147) describe the Tea Party as consisting of "conservative Republican voters." They summarize a 2010 CBS/*New York Times* poll indicating that "the 18 percent of Americans who identify themselves as Tea Party supporters tend to be Republican, white, male, married and older than 45 (p. 23)" and say that Tea Party supporters also tend to be "comfortably middle-class" people who are more likely to be evangelical Protestants than mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, or nonbelievers (p. 23). They are "skeptical, even scornful of 'establishment' Republicans" and are particularly marked by "opposition to public expenditures on education and the environment" (pp. 27, 28), while favoring Social Security and Medicare benefits for people like themselves who they deem worthy because they have earned them (pp. 60–61).

At one level, one can see Tea Partiers as an extreme type of contemporary American conservative, but there is more to Tea Partiers than that. They are extraordinarily active in primaries, assisting in the tilt of Republican candidates in their direction, and a recent study that is likely to be highly controversial argued "that people are driven to support the Tea Party from the anxiety they feel as they perceive the America they know, the country they love, slipping away, threatened by the rapidly changing face of what they believe is the 'real' America: a heterosexual, Christian, middle-class, (mostly) male, white country" (Parker & Barreto, 2013, p. 3). Indeed, Parker and Barreto (p. 244) argue, "support for the Tea Party is a proxy for reactionary conservatism."

How reliable the most negative conclusions from this study, as well as the data on which they are based, prove to be cannot be determined now, but they suggest, or so the authors argue, an extreme paranoia and status anxiety of the type the historian Richard Hofstadter (1967) analyzed in his classic book, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Current indications are that the Tea Party has great influence in Republican politics, but that the extremism of the candidates its supporters help nominate tends to repel more moderate conservative voters and that, on balance, the Tea Party phenomenon probably hurts the Republican Party more than it helps.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? WHAT ARE SOME MAJOR QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH?

The debate on the true nature of conservatism is most likely unresolvable. That said, scholars of conservatism should do more work on the dynamics of conservatism, especially changing definitions of what is considered mainstream at any point in time. How and why alliances and fallings out between different types of conservatives occur is also an important subject for

further investigation. For example, the "fusionism" that aided the diminution (although certainly not the end) of internal feuding among conservative factions in the Reagan era is usually ascribed to their common and intense anti-Communism. What other factors and settings might contribute to relative unity or diversity among different types of conservatives?

Tracking the prevalence of the public's identification with conservatism is an obvious task for the future, just as important is tracking changes in the correlates of conservatism. If, for example, the relationship tightens between conservatism and attitudes toward spending on popular programs such as Social Security, that is likely to have a strong influence on policy outcomes in the United States. We should also continue to look at the relationship of conservative sympathies to demographic factors. Right now, for example, while there are certainly African-Americans who identify as conservatives, their allegiance to the Democratic Party is such that, unlike members of most other major population groups, they vote for Democratic candidates regardless. The odds of that changing soon are low, but there is a more likely chance, especially if Republicans block immigration reform to satisfy vocal parts of the party's conservative base, that Latino Americans, who already vote strongly Democratic, could join their ranks.

As noted in this essay, the extent and nature of political polarization, especially along conservative-liberal lines, is an important subject for future research. This is as true at the mass public level as it is at the elite level because signs of increasing polarization at the public level signal a likely further hardening of the lines at the elite level and greater gridlock in the policy process. That and increased efforts to understand the emergence and political influence of movements like the Tea Party are central to understanding the future shape and character of political conflict in the United States.

Finally, in important areas not covered in this essay, research on conservative think tanks, on conservative media, and on the organization and influence of large donors to conservative causes will be central to understanding both future directions of conservative thought and action and the level of influence that wealthy conservatives exert on American politics.

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