

1.25.2023 SHOW NOTES:
**'CONSERVATIVE' ATTACKS ME FOR DEFENDING
CROWDER**

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FURTHERMORE: Many of the articles I have posted here have video links imbedded in them that did not copy over to this page. You might want to reference the original sources for further investigation.

SPEECH

(DECEMBER 1, 1783)

UPON

THE QUESTION FOR THE SPEAKER'S LEAVING THE CHAIR IN ORDER FOR THE HOUSE
TO RESOLVE ITSELF INTO A COMMITTEE

ON

MR. FOX'S EAST INDIA BILL.

As to the first of these objections, I must observe that the phrase of "the chartered rights *of men*" is full of affectation, and very unusual in the discussion of privileges conferred by charters of the present description. But it is not difficult to discover what end that ambiguous mode of expression, so often reiterated, is meant to answer.

The rights of *men*—that is to say, the natural rights of mankind—are indeed sacred things; and if any public measure is proved mischievously to affect them, the objection ought to be fatal to that measure, even if no charter at all could be set up against it. If these natural rights are further affirmed and declared by express covenants, if they are clearly defined and secured against chicane, against power and authority, by written instruments and positive engagements, they are in a still better condition: they partake not only of the sanctity of the object so secured, but of that solemn public faith itself which secures an object of such importance. Indeed, this formal recognition, by the sovereign power, of an original right in the subject, can never be subverted, but by rooting up the holding radical principles of government, and even of society itself. The charters which we call by distinction *great* are public instruments of this nature: I mean the charters of King John and King Henry the Third. The things secured by these instruments may, without any deceitful ambiguity, be very fitly called *the chartered rights of men*.

These charters have made the very name of a charter dear to the heart of every Englishman. But, Sir, there may be, and there are, charters, not only different in nature, but formed on principles *the very reverse* of those of the Great Charter. Of this kind is the charter of the East India Company. *Magna Charta* is a charter to restrain power and to destroy monopoly. The East India charter is a charter to establish monopoly and to create power. Political power and commercial monopoly are *not* the rights of men; and the rights to them derived from charters it is fallacious and sophistical to call "the chartered rights of men." These chartered rights (to speak of such charters and of their effects in terms of the greatest possible moderation) do at least suspend the natural rights of mankind at large, and in their very frame and constitution are liable to fall into a direct violation of them.

It is a charter of this latter description (that is to say, a charter of power and monopoly) which is affected by the bill before you. The bill, Sir, does without question affect it: it does affect it essentially and substantially. But, having stated to you of what description the chartered rights are which this bill touches, ***I feel no difficulty at all in acknowledging the existence of those chartered rights in their fullest extent. They belong to the Company in the surest manner, and they are secured to that body by every sort of public sanction. They are stamped by the faith of the king; they are stamped by the faith of Parliament: they have been bought for money, for money honestly and fairly paid; they have been bought for valuable consideration, over and over again.***

I therefore freely admit to the East India Company their claim to exclude their fellow-subjects from the commerce of half the globe. I admit their claim to administer an annual territorial revenue of seven millions sterling, to command an army of sixty thousand men, and to dispose (under the control of a sovereign, imperial discretion, and with the due observance of the natural and local law) of the lives and fortunes of thirty millions of their fellow-creatures. All this they possess by charter, and by Acts of Parliament, (in my opinion,) without a shadow of controversy.

Those who carry the rights and claims of the Company the furthest do not contend for more than this; and all this I freely grant. But, granting all this, they must grant to me, in my turn, that all political power which is set over men, and that all privilege claimed or exercised in exclusion of them, being wholly artificial, and for

so much a derogation from the natural equality of mankind at large, ought to be some way or other exercised ultimately for their benefit.

If this is true with regard to every species of political dominion and every description of commercial privilege, none of which can be original, self-derived rights, or grants for the mere private benefit of the holders, then such rights, or privileges, or whatever else you choose to call them, are all in the strictest sense *a trust*: and it is of the very essence of every trust to be rendered *accountable*,—and even totally to *cease*, when it substantially varies from the purposes for which alone it could have a lawful existence.

This I conceive, Sir, to be true of trusts of power vested in the highest hands, and of such, as seem to hold of no human creature. But about the application of this principle to subordinate *derivative* trusts I do not see how a controversy can be maintained. To whom, then, would I make the East India Company accountable? Why, to Parliament, to be sure,—to Parliament, from whom their trust was derived,—to Parliament, which alone is capable of comprehending the magnitude of its object, and its abuse, and alone capable of an effectual legislative remedy. The very charter, which is held out to exclude Parliament from correcting malversation with regard to the high trust vested in the Company, is the very thing which at once gives a title and imposes a duty on us to interfere with effect, wherever power and authority originating from ourselves are perverted from their purposes, and become instruments of wrong and violence.

If Parliament, Sir, had nothing to do with this charter, we might have some sort of Epicurean excuse to stand aloof, indifferent spectators of what passes in the Company's name in India and in London. But if we are the very cause of the evil, we are in a special manner engaged to the redress; and for us passively to bear with oppressions committed under the sanction of our own authority is in truth and reason for this House to be an active accomplice in the abuse.

That the power, notoriously grossly abused, has been bought from us is very certain. But this circumstance, which is urged against the bill, becomes an additional motive for our interference, lest we should be thought to have sold the blood of millions of men for the base consideration of money. We sold, I admit, all that we had to sell,—that is, our authority, not our control. We had not a right to make a market of our duties.

BRITANNICA

Edmund Burke

British philosopher and statesman

By [Charles William Parkin](#)

Edmund Burke, (born January 12? [January 1, Old Style], 1729, [Dublin](#), Ireland—died July 9, 1797, [Beaconsfield](#), Buckinghamshire, England), British statesman, parliamentary orator, and political thinker prominent in public life from 1765 to about 1795 and important in the history of political theory. He championed [conservatism](#) in opposition to Jacobinism in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).

Political life

After an unsuccessful first venture into politics, Burke was appointed secretary in 1765 to the [Marquess of Rockingham](#), leader of one of the [Whig](#) groups, the largely liberal faction in Parliament, and he entered the [House of Commons](#) that year. Burke remained Rockingham's secretary until the latter's death in 1782. Burke worked to unify the group of Whigs that had formed around Rockingham; this faction was to be the vehicle of Burke's parliamentary career.

Burke soon took an active part in the domestic [constitutional](#) controversy of [George III](#)'s reign. The main problem during the 18th century was whether king or Parliament controlled the executive. The king was seeking to reassert a more active role for the crown—which had lost some influence in the reigns of the first two Georges—without infringing on the limitations of the royal [prerogative](#) set by the revolution settlement of 1689. Burke's chief comment on this issue is his [pamphlet](#) "[Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents](#)" (1770). He argued that George's actions were against not the letter but the spirit of the constitution. The choice of ministers purely on personal grounds was favouritism; public [approbation](#) by the people through Parliament should determine their selection. This pamphlet includes Burke's famous, and new, justification of party, defined as a body of men united on public principle, which could act as a constitutional link between king and

Parliament, providing consistency and strength in administration, or principled criticism in opposition.

In 1774 Burke was elected a member of Parliament for Bristol, then the second city of the kingdom and an open [constituency](#) requiring a genuine election contest. He held this seat for six years but failed to retain the confidence of his [constituents](#). For the rest of his parliamentary career he was member for Malton, a [pocket borough](#) of Lord Rockingham's. It was at Bristol that Burke made the well-known statement on the role of the member of Parliament. The elected member should be a representative, not a mere delegate pledged to obey undeviatingly the wishes of his constituents. The electors are capable of judging his [integrity](#), and he should attend to their local interests; but, more importantly, he must address himself to the general good of the entire nation, acting according to his own judgment and [conscience](#), unfettered by [mandates](#) or prior instructions from those he represents.

Burke gave only qualified support to movements for parliamentary reform; though he accepted the possibility of widening political participation, he rejected any doctrine of mere rule of numbers. Burke's main concern, rather, was the curtailment of the crown's powers. He made a practical attempt to reduce this influence as one of the leaders of the movement that pressed for parliamentary control of royal patronage and expenditure. When the Rockingham Whigs took office in 1782, bills were passed reducing pensions and emoluments of offices. Burke was specifically connected with an act regulating the civil list, the amount voted by Parliament for the personal and household expenses of the [sovereign](#).

A second great issue that confronted Burke in 1765 was the [quarrel](#) with the [American colonies](#). Britain's imposition of the [Stamp Act](#) there in 1765, along with other measures, provoked unrest and opposition, which soon swelled into disobedience, conflict, and secession. British policy was vacillating; determination to maintain imperial control ended in coercion, repression, and unsuccessful war. Opposed to the tactics of coercion, the Rockingham group in their short administration of 1765–66 repealed the Stamp Act but asserted the imperial right to impose taxation by the [Declaratory Act](#).

Burke's best-known statements on this issue are two parliamentary speeches, "On American Taxation" (1774) and "On Moving His Resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies" (1775), and "A Letter to...the Sheriffs of Bristol, on the Affairs of America" (1777). British policy, he argued, had been both imprudent and

inconsistent, but above all legalistic and [intransigent](#), in the assertion of imperial rights. Authority must be exercised with respect for the temper of those subject to it, if there was not to be collision of power and opinion. This truth was being ignored in the imperial quarrel; it was absurd to treat [universal](#) disobedience as criminal: the revolt of a whole people argued serious misgovernment. Burke made a wide historical survey of the growth of the colonies and of their present economic problems. In the place of narrow legalism he called for a more [pragmatic](#) policy on Britain's part that would admit the claims of circumstance, utility, and [moral](#) principle in addition to those of precedent. Burke suggested that a conciliatory attitude be shown by Britain's Parliament, along with a readiness to meet American complaints and to undertake measures that would restore the colonies' confidence in imperial authority.

In view of the magnitude of the problem, the adequacy of Burke's specific remedies is questionable, but the principles on which he was basing his argument were the same as those underlying his "Present Discontents": government should ideally be a cooperative, mutually restraining relation of rulers and subjects; there must be attachment to tradition and the ways of the past, wherever possible, but, equally, recognition of the fact of change and the need to respond to it, reaffirming the [values](#) embodied in tradition under new circumstances.

[Ireland](#) was a special problem in imperial regulation. It was in strict political dependency on England and internally subject to the ascendancy of an Anglo-Irish Protestant minority that owned the bulk of the agricultural land. Roman Catholics were excluded by a penal code from political participation and public office. To these oppressions were added widespread rural poverty and a backward economic life aggravated by commercial restrictions resulting from English commercial jealousy. Burke was always concerned to ease the burdens of his native country. He consistently advocated relaxation of the economic and penal regulations, and steps toward legislative independence, at the cost of [alienating](#) his Bristol constituents and of incurring suspicions of [Roman Catholicism](#) and charges of partiality.

The remaining imperial issue, to which he devoted many years, and which he ranked as the most worthy of his labours, was that of [India](#). The commercial activities of a chartered trading concern, the British [East India Company](#), had created an extensive empire there. Burke in the 1760s and '70s opposed interference by the English government in the company's affairs as a violation of

chartered rights. However, he learned a great deal about the state of the company's government as the most active member of a select committee that was appointed in 1781 to investigate the administration of [justice](#) in India but which soon widened its field to that of a general inquiry. Burke concluded that the corrupt state of Indian government could be remedied only if the vast patronage it was bound to dispose of was in the hands neither of a company nor of the crown. He drafted the East [India Bill](#) of 1783 (of which the Whig statesman [Charles James Fox](#) was the [nominal](#) author), which proposed that India be governed by a board of independent commissioners in London. After the defeat of the bill, Burke's indignation came to centre on [Warren Hastings](#), governor-general of Bengal from 1772 to 1785. It was at Burke's instigation that Hastings was impeached in 1787, and he challenged Hastings' claim that it was impossible to apply Western standards of authority and legality to government in the East. He appealed to the concept of the Law of Nature, the moral principles rooted in the universal order of things, to which all conditions and races of men were subject.

The [impeachment](#), which is now generally regarded as an injustice to Hastings (who was ultimately acquitted), is the most [conspicuous](#) illustration of the failings to which Burke was liable throughout his public life, including his brief periods in office as paymaster general of the forces in 1782 and 1783. His political positions were sometimes marred by gross distortions and errors of judgment. His Indian speeches fell at times into violent emotion and abuse, lacking restraint and proportion, and his parliamentary activities were at times irresponsible or factious.

The outbreak of the [French Revolution](#) in 1789 was initially greeted in England with much enthusiasm. Burke, after a brief suspension of judgment, was both hostile to it and alarmed by this favourable English reaction. He was provoked into writing his [Reflections on the Revolution in France](#) (1790) by a sermon of the Protestant dissenter [Richard Price](#) welcoming the Revolution. Burke's deeply felt antagonism to the new movement propelled him to the plane of general political thought; it provoked a host of English replies, of which the best known is [Thomas Paine's](#) *The Rights of Man* (1791–92).

In the first instance Burke discussed the actual course of the Revolution, examining the personalities, motives, and policies of its leaders. More profoundly, he attempted to analyze the fundamental ideas animating the movement and, fastening on the Revolutionary concepts of "the rights of man" and popular [sovereignty](#), emphasized the dangers of [democracy](#) in the abstract and the mere

rule of numbers when unrestrained and unguided by the responsible leadership of a hereditary [aristocracy](#). Further, he challenged the whole rationalist and idealist temper of the movement. It was not merely that the old social order was being pulled down. He argued, further, that the moral fervour of the Revolution, and its vast speculative schemes of political reconstruction, were causing a devaluation of tradition and inherited values and a thoughtless destruction of the painfully acquired material and spiritual resources of society. Against all this, he appealed to the example and the virtues of the English constitution: its concern for [continuity](#) and unorganized growth; its respect for traditional wisdom and usage rather than speculative [innovation](#), for [prescriptive](#), rather than abstract, rights; its acceptance of a [hierarchy](#) of rank and property; its religious consecration of [secular](#) authority and recognition of the radical imperfection of all human contrivances.

As an analysis and prediction of the course of the Revolution, Burke's French writings, though frequently intemperate and uncontrolled, were in some ways strikingly acute; but his lack of sympathy with its positive ideals concealed from him its more fruitful and permanent potentialities. It is for the criticism and affirmation of fundamental political attitudes that the *Reflections* and [An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs](#) (1791) retain their freshness, relevance, and force.

Burke opposed the French Revolution to the end of his life, demanding war against the new state and gaining a European reputation and influence. But his hostility to the Revolution went beyond that of most of his party and in particular was challenged by Fox. Burke's long friendship with Fox came to a dramatic end in a parliamentary debate (May 1791). Ultimately the majority of the party passed with Burke into support of William Pitt's government. In 1794, at the [conclusion](#) of Hastings' impeachment, Burke retired from Parliament. His last years were clouded by the death of his only son, on whom his political ambitions had come to centre. He continued to write, defending himself from his critics, deploring the condition of Ireland, and opposing any recognition of the French government (notably in "Three Letters Addressed to a Member of the Present Parliament on the Proposals for Peace, with the Regicide Directory of France" [1796–97]).

Burke's thought and influence

Burke's writings on [France](#), though the most profound of his works, cannot be read as a complete statement of his views on politics. Burke, in fact, never gave a

systematic exposition of his fundamental beliefs but appealed to them always in relation to specific issues. But it is possible to regard his writings as an [integrated](#) whole in terms of the constant principles underlying his practical positions.

These principles are, in essence, an exploration of the concept of “nature,” or “[natural law](#).” Burke conceives the emotional and spiritual life of man as a harmony within the larger order of the universe. Natural impulse, that is, contains within itself self-restraint and self-criticism; the [moral](#) and spiritual life is continuous with it, generated from it and essentially sympathetic to it. It follows that society and state make possible the full realization of human potentiality, embody a [common good](#), and represent a tacit or explicit agreement on norms and ends. The [political community](#) acts ideally as a unity.

This interpretation of nature and the natural order implies deep respect for the historical process and the usages and social achievements built up over time. Therefore, [social change](#) is not merely possible but also inevitable and desirable. But the scope and the role of thought operating as a reforming instrument on society as a whole is limited. It should act under the promptings of specific tensions or specific possibilities, in close union with the detailed process of change, rather than in large speculative schemes involving [extensive](#) interference with the stable, habitual life of society. Also, it ought not to place excessive emphasis on some ends at the expense of others; in particular, it should not give rein to a moral idealism (as in the French Revolution) that sets itself in radical opposition to the existing order. Such attempts cut across the natural processes of [social development](#), initiating uncontrollable forces or provoking a dialectical reaction of excluded factors. Burke’s hope, in effect, is not a realization of particular ends, such as the “liberty” and “equality” of the [French Revolution](#), but an intensification and reconciliation of the multifarious elements of the good life that community exists to forward.

In his own day, Burke’s writings on France were an important inspiration to German and French counterrevolutionary thought. His influence in [England](#) has been more diffuse, more balanced, and more durable. He stands as the original exponent of long-lived [constitutional](#) conventions, the idea of party, and the role of the member of Parliament as free representative, not delegate. More generally, his remains the most persuasive statement of certain inarticulate political and social principles long and widely held in England: the validity of status and [hierarchy](#) and the limited role of politics in the life of society.

Edmund Burke and the Birth of Traditional Conservatism

Edmund Burke (1729-1797) is one of the philosophical fountainheads of modern conservatism. But he didn't start out that way.

Edmund Burke and Modern Conservatism

The winner of the 2018 Longman-*History Today* Book Prize provides an intriguing and accessible study on the evolution, dissemination and continued influence of Edmund Burke's political ideas.

BRITANNICA

conservatism

political philosophy

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.

This article discusses the [intellectual](#) roots and political history of conservatism from the 18th century to the present. For coverage of conservative ideas in the history of political philosophy, see [political philosophy](#).

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—as it did, for example, in the late 1980s, when hard-line communists in the [Soviet Union](#) were often referred to as "conservatives." Typically, however, the [conservative](#) temperament displays two

characteristics that are scarcely compatible with [communism](#). The first is a distrust of human nature, rootlessness (social disconnectedness), and untested [innovations](#), together with a corresponding trust in unbroken historical [continuity](#) and in the [traditional](#) 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](#) 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 [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](#), 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.

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](#) (see [incomes policy](#)).

The claim that society is too complex to be improved through social engineering naturally raises the question, “What kind of understanding of society is possible?” The most common conservative answer emphasizes the idea of tradition. People are what they are because they have inherited the skills, manners, [morality](#), and other cultural resources of their ancestors. An understanding of tradition—specifically, a knowledge of the history of one’s own society or country—is therefore the most valuable [cognitive](#) resource available to a political leader, not because it is a source of abstract lessons but because it puts him directly in touch with the society whose rules he may be modifying.

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](#).

Conservatism has often been associated with traditional and established forms of [religion](#). After 1789 the appeal of religion redoubled, in part because of a craving for security in an age of [chaos](#). The [Roman Catholic Church](#), because of its roots in the [Middle Ages](#), has appealed to more conservatives than has any other religion. Although he was not a Catholic, Burke praised Catholicism as “the most effectual barrier” against radicalism. But conservatism has had no dearth of [Protestant](#), [Jewish](#), [Islamic](#), and strongly [anticlerical](#) adherents.

Intellectual roots of conservatism

The Burkean foundations



[Edmund Burke](#)

Although [conservatives](#) sometimes claim philosophers as ancient as [Aristotle](#) and [Cicero](#) as their forebears, the first explicitly [conservative](#) political theorist is generally considered to be [Edmund Burke](#). In 1790, when the [French Revolution](#) still seemed to promise a bloodless [utopia](#), Burke predicted in his [Reflections on the Revolution in France](#)—and not by any lucky blind guess but by an analysis of its rejection of tradition and inherited values—that the revolution would descend into [terror](#) and [dictatorship](#). In their rationalist [contempt](#) for the past, he charged, the revolutionaries were destroying time-tested institutions without any [assurance](#) that they could replace them with anything better. Political power is not a license to rebuild society according to some abstract, untested scheme; it is a trust to be held by those who are mindful of both the value of what they have inherited and of their duties to their inheritors. For Burke, the idea of inheritance extended far beyond [property](#) to include [language](#), manners and [morals](#), and appropriate responses to the human condition. To be human is to inherit a [culture](#), and politics cannot be understood outside that culture. In contrast to the [Enlightenment](#) philosophers [Thomas Hobbes](#), [John Locke](#), and [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](#), each of whom conceived of political society as based on a [hypothetical social contract](#) among the living, Burke argued that

Society is indeed a contract....[But, a]s the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born....Changing the state as often as there are floating fancies,...no

one generation could link with the other. Men would be little better than the flies of a summer.

Because the social contract as Burke understood it involves future generations as well as those of the present and the past, he was able to urge improvement through political change, but only as long as the change is evolutionary: “A [disposition](#) to preserve and an ability to improve, taken together, would be my standard of a statesman.”

Burke’s [conservatism](#) was not an abstract doctrine; it represented the particular conservatism of the unwritten British constitution. In the politics of his time Burke was a Whig, and he [bequeathed](#) to later conservative thinkers the Whig belief in limited government. This belief was partly why Burke defended the [American Revolution](#) (1775–83), which he believed was a justified defense of the traditional liberties of Englishmen.

Burke shocked his contemporaries by insisting with brutal frankness that “illusions” and “prejudices” are socially necessary. He believed that most human beings are innately depraved, steeped in [original sin](#), and unable to better themselves with their feeble reason. Better, he said, to rely on the “latent wisdom” of [prejudice](#), which accumulates slowly through the years, than to “put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason.” Among such [prejudices](#) are those that favour an [established church](#) and a landed [aristocracy](#); members of the latter, according to Burke, are the “great oaks” and “proper chieftains” of society, provided that they temper their rule with a spirit of timely reform and remain within the [constitutional](#) framework.

In Burke’s writings the entire political wisdom of [Europe](#) is formulated in a new [idiom](#), designed to bring out the folly of French revolutionaries intoxicated by sudden power and abstract ideas of a perfect society. For Burke, modern states are so complex that any attempt to reform them on the basis of [metaphysical](#) doctrines alone is bound to end in despotism. The passion and eloquence with which he developed this argument contributed significantly to the powerful conservative reactions against the French Revolution throughout Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Maistre and Latin conservatism



[Joseph de Maistre](#)

Among the thinkers influenced by Burke was the French diplomat and polemicist [Joseph de Maistre](#), who developed his own more extreme brand of conservatism, known as Latin conservatism, early in the 19th century. Whereas Burkean conservatism was evolutionary, the conservatism of Maistre was counterrevolutionary. Both men favoured tradition over the [radical innovations](#) of the French Revolution, but the traditions they favoured were very different: Burke rejected the revolution for the sake of traditional liberties, Maistre for the sake of traditional [authority](#)—especially the authority of [monarch](#) and church. Burke was not [authoritarian](#) but constitutionalist—and always parliamentary—whereas Maistre, in stressing the authority of the traditional elite, is often justifiably called not conservative but reactionary.

Indeed, Maistre rejected the entire heritage of the Enlightenment, attributing the revolutionary disorders of Europe to [pernicious](#) Enlightenment ideas. He presented a picture of human beings as essentially emotional and prone to disorder and evil unless controlled within a tight political structure dominated by rulers, [priests](#), and the threat of the public executioner. Against the French Revolutionary slogan “Liberty, equality, fraternity,” Maistre proclaimed the value of “Throne and altar.” His program called for a [restoration](#) of hereditary and [absolute monarchy](#) in France, though it would be a more religious and less [frivolous](#) monarchy than before. The [Bourbon Restoration](#) in France after 1815 did in fact attempt to create a modified version of the [ancien régime](#) somewhat resembling that suggested by Maistre, but the Bourbons were overthrown in 1830.

Maistre's writings were an important source of conservative thought in [Spain](#), [Italy](#), and France in the first half of the 19th century. But no work by Maistre or any other enemy of the [Jacobins](#) (the radical leaders of the French Revolution from 1793 to 1794) has approached the influence of Burke's classic essay, which became the basis of all [subsequent](#) conservative arguments against the French Revolution. Whereas Maistre's rigid, hierarchical conservatism has died out, Burke's more flexible brand is stronger than ever, permeating all political parties of the West that stress gradual, as opposed to radical or revolutionary, change.

Conservatism in the 19th century

The 19th century was in many ways [antithetical](#) to [conservatism](#), both as a [political philosophy](#) and as a program of particular parties identified with [conservative](#) interests. The [Enlightenment](#) had engendered widespread belief in the possibility of improving the human condition—a belief, that is, in the idea of progress—and a rationalist [disposition](#) to tamper with or discard existing institutions or practices in pursuit of that goal. The [French Revolution](#) gave powerful expression to this belief, and the early [Industrial Revolution](#) and advances in [science](#) reinforced it. The resulting rationalist politics embraced a broad segment of the political spectrum, including liberal reformism, [trade-union socialism](#) (or [social democracy](#)), and ultimately [Marxism](#). In the face of this constant rationalist [innovation](#), [conservatives](#) often found themselves forced to adopt a merely defensive role, so that the political [initiative](#) lay always in the other camp.

Metternich and the Concert of Europe



[Metternich](#)

The massive social upheavals of the Revolutionary and [Napoleonic](#) periods provoked a reaction of more immediate and far-reaching consequence than the writings of conservative theorists. During the period 1815–48, the Austrian statesman Prince [Metternich](#), a major influence in Austria and in Europe generally, devoted his energies to erecting an antirevolutionary chain of international alliances throughout Europe.

Metternich was a dominating figure at the [Congress of Vienna](#), the international peace conference [convened](#) in 1814 near the close of the [Napoleonic wars](#). The peace settlement, reached at Vienna in 1815, was based on conservative principles shared by the Austrian delegate, Metternich; the British delegate, [Viscount Castlereagh](#); the French delegate, [Talleyrand](#); and the formerly liberal Russian [tsar Alexander I](#). These principles were traditionalism, in reaction to 25 years of rapid change; legitimism (hereditary [monarchy](#) as the only lawful rule); and restoration of monarchs ousted after 1789.

The European great powers also attempted to enforce peace through periodic conferences between governments that gave rise to a period of international cooperation known as the [Concert of Europe](#). The Concert system, which amounted to a [rudimentary](#) form of international governance, was used to arbitrate peacefully several international disputes and to suppress liberal uprisings within the borders of the member states.

More From Britannica

[United States: Postwar conservatism](#)

According to Metternich, the liberal revolutions of the 1820s and '30s in [Spain](#) and parts of [Italy](#) and [Germany](#) were “unhistorical” and unrealistic. Liberals were engaged in a [futile](#) attempt to impose the English institutions of parliamentary government and [constitutional monarchy](#) in places where they had no historical roots. Using arguments borrowed from Burke, he insisted on the need for [continuity](#) with the past and orderly, organic development. Hence his sarcastic comments on the liberal revolutions in Naples and elsewhere:

A people who can neither read nor write, whose last word is the dagger—fine material for [constitutional](#) principles!...The English constitution is the work of centuries....There is no universal recipe for constitutions.

The retreat of old-style conservatism

The settlement engineered by Metternich at the Congress of Vienna was reactionary in that it aimed at reinstating the political and social order that existed before the French Revolution. Nevertheless, the restored monarchies in [France](#), Austria, and Spain thought it prudent to sanction the formation of parliamentary institutions as a sop to liberal [sentiment](#). Political parties were hardly necessary in these states, given the limited powers accorded to the new parliaments and the narrowness of the [franchise](#). As a result, the monarchies' most reliable supporters, the aristocratic landowners and the [clergy](#), were able to secure the [allegiance](#) of the general population. They were especially influential in rural areas, where an inherently conservative peasantry was still relatively unaffected by [industrialization](#) and other modern [innovations](#).

This political settlement proved [untenable](#) within a few decades of the [Restoration](#), chiefly because of the increasing discontent of urban liberals. City dwellers tended to be more active politically than rural people, and as urban populations grew in both absolute and relative size owing to the Industrial Revolution, their festering discontent began to threaten the Restoration establishment. In the face of their agitations and revolts, conservatives gradually lost ground, and after the [Revolutions of 1848](#)—which resulted in the exile of Metternich and of King [Louis-Philippe](#) of France—conservative factions either lost power to liberals and nationalists or clung to influence only in coalitions with other groups.

French conservatives remained loyal to the restored monarchy, but the [revolutions of 1830](#) and 1848 dealt successive blows to that [institution](#), and before the end of the 19th century royalists in France faced the disconcerting fact that there were no less than three families claiming a nonexistent French throne. Supporters of French conservatism among the Roman Catholic clergy, the military officer class, and the landed [aristocracy](#) remained haunted by [nostalgia](#) for the [ancien régime](#) and thus collided with the [aspirations](#) of the growing and powerful middle class.

Conservatism and [nationalism](#)

Industrialization hastened the decline of old-style [conservatism](#) because it tended to strengthen the commerce-minded middle class and to create a new industrial working class with a diminished [allegiance](#) to old institutions. Between 1830 and 1880 [liberalism](#) won repeated victories over the [conservative](#) establishment in western [Europe](#). [Conservatives](#), like other political groups, had to establish majorities in parliament if they wanted to hold power, and the progressive expansion of the [franchise](#) meant that they had to [cultivate](#) support from a broad electorate. But their chief source of strength, the rural peasantry, was declining in numbers relative to other social groups and was in any case too small to support an effective national party.



[Otto von Bismarck](#)

Conservative parties eventually solved this problem by identifying themselves with [nationalist sentiments](#). This strategy was pursued most vigorously in [Germany](#), where the unification of the German states into a single nation became a central preoccupation of both liberals and conservatives by the middle of the 19th century. The Prussian chancellor [Otto von Bismarck](#) used nationalist sentiments stirred up by [Prussia's](#) successful wars against [Denmark](#) (1864), Austria (1866), and [France](#) (1870–71) to create a united Germany under the Prussian [monarchy](#) in 1871. The conservative governments he headed as Germany's chancellor for the next 20 years undertook various [social welfare measures](#)—such as [pensions](#) and [unemployment benefits](#)—to draw working-class support away from the leftist [Social Democratic Party](#). Although Bismarck protected the dominant position of the Prussian landowning ([Junker](#)) and officer classes, his social welfare measures [mitigated](#) class conflict and [facilitated](#) a social cohesion in Germany that lasted to the end of [World War I](#).

By the end of the 19th century, conservative parties throughout Europe had adopted the nationalist strategy. This gave them increased popular appeal in an era of intensifying patriotic feeling, but it also contributed to the climate of international rivalry that culminated in the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Conservative parties were almost invariably the staunchest and most intractable supporters of this war.

[Great Britain](#)



[Benjamin Disraeli](#)

In the 17th and 18th centuries conservative political causes in [Great Britain](#) were defended by the Tories, a Parliamentary faction representing landed gentry, established merchant classes, and the clergy. This faction became the Tory Party in 1784 and finally adopted the label “Conservative” after 1831. As the [Conservative Party](#) it retained [great power](#) throughout the 19th century, consistently receiving the support of about half the electorate. Although the party was shaken by the Whig [Reform Bill of 1832](#) and by other measures of the Whig and [Liberal](#) parties that undermined the power of the landed gentry, it was rescued by the fertile imagination and [astute](#) management of [Benjamin Disraeli](#), who was [prime minister](#) in 1868 and again from 1874 to 1880. Disraeli nurtured the party’s support among the working class by extending the franchise to industrial workers in the Reform Bill of 1867. His policy of “Tory democracy,” as it came to be known, combined a desire to [mitigate](#) the harsh conditions that unrestrained [capitalism](#) imposed on ordinary workers with a belief in the value of the [class](#) system and established institutions such as the monarchy and the church. Under Disraeli the party was able to broaden its electoral support and thereby outflank the [Liberal Party](#) and the new commercial class it represented. Disraeli’s successor as party leader, Lord [Salisbury](#), was prime minister in 1885 and again from 1886 to 1892 and from 1895 to 1902; [Arthur Balfour](#) led another Conservative government from 1902 to 1905. This era of Conservative rule was marked by [imperialism](#), high [tariffs](#), and the gradual erosion of the party’s working-class [vote](#).

[Christian Democracy](#)

By the end of the 19th century, industrialization had created a large and turbulent working class whose increasing involvement in politics gave it a powerful voice. All Christian churches, but especially the [Roman Catholic Church](#), faced anticlerical attacks from liberal reformers on the one hand and working-class socialists on the other. The Catholic church responded, notably under Pope [Leo XIII](#) (reigned 1878–1903), by developing social doctrines and political movements that combined protection of the church’s institutional interests with policies of [social justice](#) intended to draw industrial workers back to the faith. This movement, which eventually came to be called [Christian Democracy](#), achieved varying degrees of success in France, Germany, and [Italy](#) in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Christian Democrats were conservative in their affirmation of the [right](#) to [private property](#) as basic to a Christian society, but they also insisted that the rich look after the needs of the poor. Christian [Democracy](#), in other words, recognized both a legal

structure that protected private property and a [moral imperative](#) to use property in a compassionate way. In practical politics, Christian Democrats tended to be opportunists who aligned themselves with the ideological centre.

The [United States](#)

Politics in the United States never quite conformed to the doctrinal patterns exhibited in continental Europe or even [Britain](#), mainly because there was never a monarchy, an [aristocracy](#), or an [established church](#) for conservatives to defend or for liberals to attack. [John Adams](#), [Alexander Hamilton](#), and the [Federalists](#) of the late 18th and early 19th centuries were conservative in their emphasis on order and security, but in other respects they were closer to [classical liberalism](#). Although they may have shared Burke's respect for a "natural [aristocracy](#)," they had no use for a hereditary one. The nearest thing to an American aristocracy was the wealthy plantation-owning class in the South before the [American Civil War](#) (1861–65). Members of this class generally favoured the [rights of states](#) against the power of the federal government, and prominent defenders of this position, such as [John C. Calhoun](#), have properly been seen as conservative thinkers.

But if there was relatively little explicit conservatism in the United States in the 19th century, the political history of the country was also remarkably resistant to revolutionary radicalism. The American working class generally shared the hopeful [individualism](#) of the middle class. As a result, the common view of the United States until well into the 20th century was that it was a country of one basic political tradition: liberalism. For a long time it seemed that [conservatism](#) could not take root in a country founded on the liberal doctrines of the [Founding Fathers](#).

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](#).

[Great Britain](#)

At the start of the 20th century, the [Conservative Party](#) in Great [Britain](#) seemed to stand at the summit of its popularity. This ascendancy was temporarily halted by the [Liberal](#) victory in the general [election](#) of 1906. By this time, however, the Liberals had begun to lose trade-union and working-class supporters to the [Labour Party](#), and the Labour victory of 1924 spelled the end of the [Liberal Party](#) as an effective political force. During the next four decades the [Conservatives](#) formed the government most of the time. Their success was partly the result of their having absorbed large numbers of formerly Liberal middle-class voters. The [Conservative](#) Party thus became a union of old Tory and Liberal interests combined against Labour.



[Margaret Thatcher](#)

In the interwar period, [conservatism](#) in Britain became closely identified with the defense of middle- and upper-class privileges, an unconstructive opposition to [socialism](#), and, during the 1930s, [appeasement](#) (a deal-making and commercialist approach to the rising Nazi menace). However, following the introduction of a [mixed economy](#) and the vast extension of state welfare services under the Labour government of [Clement Attlee](#) after 1945, the Conservatives reversed very few of their predecessors' [innovations](#) when they returned to power in 1951. Instead they claimed to be better able to administer the [welfare state](#) efficiently. Indeed, to some extent they even tried to outbid their opponents with their own programs of social spending, including measures to encourage the construction of new homes.

Three decades later this era of liberal-conservative accommodation came to a dramatic close under the government of [Margaret Thatcher](#), whose energetic brand of conservatism stressed individual [initiative](#), strident anticommunism, and [laissez-faire](#) economics. Thatcher's commitment to individual initiative was so strong, in fact, that she virtually [repudiated](#) the organic view of traditional conservatives when she declared that "there is no such thing as society." By this she meant that what is conventionally called "society" is nothing more than a collection of individuals. This view had much more in common with modern [libertarianism](#) than with the older conservatism of Burke. Thatcher's Tory successors—notably [David Cameron](#) (2010–16) and [Theresa May](#) (2016–19)—had a rather less extreme individualistic orientation and reincorporated some of the communitarian elements of traditional conservatism into their [ideology](#).

Continental Europe

Conservatism elsewhere in western Europe was generally represented by two or more parties, ranging from the liberal centre to the moderate and extreme right. The three types of conservative party were the agrarian (particularly in Scandinavia), the Christian Democratic, and those parties allied closely with big business. These categories are very general and are not mutually exclusive.

The Christian Democratic parties had the longest history, their predecessors having emerged in the 19th century to support the church and the monarchy against liberal and radical elements. After World War I, supporters of business became the predominant element in these parties. In Italy clerical interests remained strongly represented in the Christian Democratic Party (from 1993 the Italian Popular Party), which dominated governments in that country for four decades from 1945. This party never possessed a coherent policy, however, because it was little more than a disparate alliance of moderate and conservative interest groups. The Christian Democrats anchored a long series of governing coalitions with smaller centrist parties and the Italian Socialist Party. These coalitions, while often politically ineffective and increasingly corrupt, served to exclude the large Italian Communist Party (from 1991 the Democratic Party of the Left) from power through the end of the Cold War. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and communism was no longer perceived as a threat to Europe, the Christian Democrats lost much of their support. Their eclipse coincided with the growth of other conservative and nationalist groups formerly outside the mainstream of Italian politics—such as the Northern League, which called for the creation of a federated Italian republic, and the National Alliance (until 1994 the Italian Social Movement), which many regarded as neofascist—and with the founding in 1994 of a new conservative party, Forza Italia (“Go, Italy!”), by the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi.

In Germany, a country divided between Roman Catholics and Protestants, the church played a far less significant role in the main conservative party, the Christian Democratic Union. After 1950, following an internal debate over economic and social questions, the party adopted a program that included support for a market economy and a strong commitment to maintaining and improving social insurance and other social welfare programs. Illustrating the conservative temper of Germany’s political climate since the end of World War II, the opposition Social Democratic Party of Germany progressively eliminated the socialist content of its

program, to the point of embracing the profit motive in a party congress at [Bad Godesberg](#) in 1959. In power continuously from 1982 to 1998, the Christian Democrats presided over the unification of [East Germany](#) with [West Germany](#) following the collapse of Soviet-supported communist regimes across eastern Europe in 1989–90. From the 1990s, German [conservatives](#) tended to adhere to an [ideology](#) of minimal government, [deregulation](#), privatization, and the reining-in of the [welfare state](#). Putting these ideas into political practice, however, proved difficult if not impossible, since many Germans continued to support an extensive safety net of [unemployment insurance](#) and other social welfare programs.



[Charles de Gaulle](#)

In contrast to Italy and Germany, no Christian Democratic party emerged in [France](#) to represent moderate conservative opinion. Instead, a large proportion of French conservatives supported parties such as [Rally for the Republic](#) (renamed Union for a Popular Movement in 2002 and the Republicans in 2015)—which espoused a highly nationalistic conservatism based on the [legacy](#) of [Charles de Gaulle](#), president of France from 1958 to 1969—or anti-immigration groups such as the National Front, led until 2011 by [Jean-Marie Le Pen](#) and subsequently by his daughter, [Marine Le Pen](#); the latter party, some argued, was not so much conservative as reactionary or neofascist. Gaullist conservatism emphasized tradition and order and aimed at a politically united Europe under French leadership. Gaullists espoused divergent views on social issues, however. The large number of Gaullist and non-Gaullist conservative parties, their lack of stability, and their tendency to identify themselves with local issues made it difficult to

categorize these groups in simple terms. In the early 21st century, French conservatives of several stripes were united by a number of developments. One was the theme of “law and order,” sounded strongly by interior minister (and later president) [Nicolas Sarkozy](#). Unemployed youths in suburban [Paris](#) and elsewhere—many of whom were immigrants or the children of immigrants—engaged in periodic rioting to protest their plight and were met with stiff (and popular) police resistance. Another thread uniting French conservatives was the perceived threat to French values from immigrants, especially Muslims. One of the values allegedly in danger was the [conviction](#) that public education should be strictly [secular](#). When young Muslim women insisted on wearing [veils](#) to school, the French state reacted strongly—a reaction that may have succeeded less in reaffirming French values than in further alienating Muslims from French society.

In general, conservatism in Europe has exerted a [pervasive](#) political influence since the start of the 20th century, finding expression in parties of very different character. These parties have espoused traditional middle-class values and opposed unnecessary state involvement in economic affairs and radical attempts at income redistribution. They also have been characterized by an absence of [ideology](#) and often by the lack of any well-articulated political philosophy.

[Japan](#)

The political and social changes that took place in Japan after the [Meiji Restoration](#) (1868) were significant and extensive, involving the abolition of feudal institutions and the introduction of Western political ideas such as [constitutional government](#). However, despite institutional [innovations](#) and the dislocation resulting from rapid industrialization, political developments continued to be shaped primarily by traditional loyalties and attitudes. Except for the period of [military government](#) during the 1930s and '40s, [conservative](#) rule in Japan has been nearly uninterrupted since the beginning of party politics in the 1880s. Conservative parties—the two most important of which merged to form the [Liberal-Democratic Party](#) in 1955—were dominated by personalities rather than by [ideology](#) and dogma; and personal loyalties to leaders of factions within the party, rather than commitment to policy, determined the [allegiance](#) of conservative members of the Diet. As one American scholar, Nathaniel B. Thayer, described them, the factions

have adopted the social values, customs, and relationships of an older Japan....The old concepts of loyalty, [hierarchy](#), and duty hold sway in them. And the Dietman (or any other Japanese) feels very comfortable when he steps into this world.

The Liberal-Democratic Party has been intimately linked with big business, and its policies have been guided primarily by the objective of fostering a stable [environment](#) for the development of Japan's market economy. To this end, the party has functioned primarily as a broker between conflicting business interests.

In the early 21st century there was a resurgence of Japanese [nationalism](#), much of it centring on how the history of Japan in the 20th century—particularly the period before and during World War II—was to be taught. Conservative nationalists insisted that the Japanese military had done nothing wrong and had indeed acted honourably and that stories of widespread [war crimes](#) were fabricated by Japan's enemies, both foreign and domestic. Just how [pervasive](#) and influential this resurgent [nationalism](#) might be remains to be seen.

[The United States](#)

The perception of the United States as an inherently liberal country began to change in the wake of the [New Deal](#), the economic relief program undertaken by the Democratic administration of Pres. [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) in 1933 to help raise the country out of the [Great Depression](#). This program greatly expanded the federal government's involvement in the economy through the regulation of private enterprise, the levying of higher [taxes](#) on [corporations](#) and the wealthy, and the expansion of social welfare programs. The [Republican Party](#), drawing on the support of big business, the wealthy, and prosperous farmers, stubbornly opposed the New Deal.

As Democratic liberals moved to the left in [endorsing](#) a larger role for government, Republicans generally clung to a 19th-century version of [liberalism](#) that called for the government to avoid interfering in the market. This policy produced little success for Republicans at the polls. In matters of [foreign policy](#), however, the [Old Right](#), as these staunch [conservatives](#) were known, was powerful and popular enough to prevent the United States from entering [World War II](#) until the Japanese attack on the U.S. naval base at [Pearl Harbor](#), Hawaii, in 1941 (see [Pearl Harbor attack](#)). By the time the Republicans regained the presidency in 1953, they had

accepted most of the New Deal reforms and were preoccupied with the battle against communists at home and abroad.

In the first decades after the [war](#), the United States, like [Britain](#), gradually expanded social services and increased government regulation of the economy. In the 1970s, however, the postwar [economic growth](#) that the United States and other Western countries had relied on to finance social [welfare](#) programs began to slacken, just as Japan and other East Asian nations were finally attaining Western levels of prosperity. Whatever the causes of the West's economic stagnation, it became clear that liberal policies of governmental activism were incapable of solving the problem.



[Ronald Reagan](#)

At this point a new group of mainly American conservatives, the so-called [neoconservatives](#), arose to argue that high levels of taxation and the government's intrusive regulation of private enterprise were hampering economic growth. No less troubling, in their view, was the way in which social welfare policies were leading those who received welfare benefits to become increasingly dependent upon government. The neoconservatives generally accepted a modest welfare state—indeed, they were sometimes described as disenchanting welfare liberals—but they insisted that social welfare programs should help people help themselves, not make them permanent [wards](#) of the state. In this and other respects neoconservatives saw themselves as defenders of middle-class virtues such as thrift, hard work, and self-restraint, all of which they took to be under attack in the

cultural upheaval of the reputedly hedonistic 1960s. They also took a keen interest in [foreign affairs](#), adopting an interventionist stance that set them apart from the isolationist tendencies of earlier conservatives. Many of them argued that the United States had both a [right](#) and a duty to intervene in the affairs of other nations in order to combat the influence of Soviet [communism](#) and to advance American interests; some even claimed that the United States had a duty to remake the non-Western world on the model of American democratic [capitalism](#). Among American political leaders, the chief representatives of [neoconservatism](#) were the Republican presidents [Ronald Reagan](#) (1981–89) and [George W. Bush](#) (2001–09). Its most [articulate](#) advocates, however, were academics who entered politics, such as [New York](#) Sen. [Daniel Patrick Moynihan](#) and [Jeane Kirkpatrick](#), who served as ambassador to the [United Nations](#) during the Reagan administration.

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](#) (2017–21), 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](#).

BRITANNICA

liberalism

politics



Top Questions

What is liberalism?

Liberalism is a political and economic doctrine that emphasizes individual [autonomy](#), [equality of opportunity](#), and the protection of individual rights (primarily to life, liberty, and property), originally against the [state](#) and later against both the state and private economic actors, including businesses.

Who were the intellectual founders of liberalism?

The intellectual founders of [liberalism](#) were the English philosopher [John Locke](#) (1632–1704), who developed a theory of political authority based on natural individual rights and the consent of the governed, and the Scottish economist and philosopher [Adam Smith](#) (1723–90), who argued that societies prosper when individuals are free to pursue their self-interest within an economic system based on private ownership of the means of production and [competitive markets](#), controlled neither by the state nor by private [monopolies](#).

[John Locke](#)

[Learn more about John Locke.](#)

[Adam Smith](#)

[Learn more about Adam Smith.](#)

How is liberalism related to democracy?

In [John Locke](#)'s theory, the consent of the governed was secured through a system of majority rule, whereby the government would carry out the expressed will of the electorate. However, in the England of Locke's time and in other [democratic](#) societies for centuries thereafter, not every person was considered a member of the electorate, which until the 20th century was generally limited to propertied white males. There is no necessary connection between liberalism and any specific form of democratic government, and indeed Locke's liberalism presupposed a [constitutional monarchy](#).

Read more below: [Classical liberalism: Liberalism and democracy](#)

How does classical liberalism differ from modern liberalism?

Classical liberals (now often called [libertarians](#)) regard the state as the primary threat to individual freedom and advocate limiting its powers to those necessary to protect basic rights against interference by others. Modern liberals have held that freedom can also be threatened by private economic actors, such as businesses, that exploit workers or dominate governments, and they advocate state action, including economic [regulation](#) and provision of [social services](#), to ameliorate conditions (e.g., extreme [poverty](#)) that may hamper the exercise of basic rights or undermine individual [autonomy](#). Many also recognize broader rights such as the rights to adequate employment, health care, and education.

Read more below: [Modern liberalism](#)

How does modern liberalism differ from conservatism?

Modern liberals are generally willing to experiment with large-scale [social change](#) to further their project of protecting and enhancing individual freedom. [Conservatives](#) are generally suspicious of such ideologically driven programs,

insisting that lasting and beneficial social change must proceed organically, through gradual shifts in public attitudes, values, customs, and institutions.

liberalism, political doctrine that takes protecting and [enhancing](#) the freedom of the [individual](#) to be the central problem of politics. Liberals typically believe that [government](#) is necessary to protect individuals from being harmed by others, but they also recognize that government itself can pose a threat to liberty. As the American Revolutionary pamphleteer [Thomas Paine](#) expressed it in *Common Sense* (1776), government is at best “a necessary evil.” Laws, [judges](#), and [police](#) are needed to secure the individual’s life and liberty, but their coercive power may also be turned against the individual. The problem, then, is to devise a system that gives government the power necessary to protect [individual liberty](#) but also prevents those who govern from abusing that power.

The problem is [compounded](#) when one asks whether this is all that government can or should do on behalf of individual freedom. Some liberals—the so-called neoclassical liberals, or [libertarians](#)—answer that it is. Since the late 19th century, however, most liberals have insisted that the powers of government can promote as well as protect the freedom of the individual. According to modern liberalism, the chief task of government is to remove obstacles that prevent individuals from living freely or from fully realizing their potential. Such obstacles include [poverty](#), [disease](#), [discrimination](#), and ignorance. The disagreement among liberals over whether government should promote individual freedom rather than merely protect it is reflected to some extent in the different prevailing [conceptions](#) of liberalism in the [United States](#) and Europe since the late 20th century. In the United States, liberalism is associated with the [welfare-state](#) policies of the [New Deal](#) program of the [Democratic](#) administration of Pres. [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#), whereas in Europe it is more commonly associated with a commitment to limited government and [laissez-faire](#) economic policies (see *below* [Contemporary liberalism](#)).

This article discusses the political foundations and history of liberalism from the 17th century to the present. For coverage of classical and contemporary philosophical liberalism, see [political philosophy](#). For biographies of individual philosophers, see [John Locke](#); [John Stuart Mill](#); [John Rawls](#).

General characteristics

Liberalism is derived from two related features of Western [culture](#). The first is the West's preoccupation with individuality, as compared to the emphasis in other civilizations on [status](#), [caste](#), and tradition. Throughout much of history, individuals have been submerged in and subordinate to their [clan](#), [tribe](#), [ethnic group](#), or kingdom. Liberalism is the culmination of developments in Western society that produced a sense of the importance of human individuality, a liberation of the individual from complete subservience to the group, and a relaxation of the tight hold of custom, [law](#), and authority. In this respect, liberalism stands for the emancipation of the individual. *See also* [individualism](#).

Liberalism also derives from the practice of adversariality, or adversariness, in European political and economic life, a process in which institutionalized competition—such as the competition between different [political parties](#) in [electoral contests](#), between prosecution and defense in [adversary procedure](#), or between different producers in a [market](#) economy (*see* [monopoly and competition](#))—generates a [dynamic](#) social order. Adversarial systems have always been precarious, however, and it took a long time for the belief in adversariality to emerge from the more traditional view, traceable at least to [Plato](#), that the state should be an organic structure, like a beehive, in which the different [social classes](#) cooperate by performing distinct yet complementary roles. The belief that competition is an essential part of a [political system](#) and that good government requires a vigorous opposition was still considered strange in most European countries in the early 19th century.

Underlying the liberal belief in adversariality is the [conviction](#) that human beings are essentially rational creatures capable of settling their political disputes through [dialogue](#) and compromise. This aspect of liberalism became particularly prominent in 20th-century projects aimed at eliminating [war](#) and resolving disagreements between states through organizations such as the [League of Nations](#), the [United Nations](#), and the [International Court of Justice](#) (World Court).

Liberalism has a close but sometimes uneasy relationship with [democracy](#). At the centre of democratic doctrine is the belief that governments derive their authority from popular election; liberalism, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the scope of governmental activity. Liberals often have been wary of [democracy](#), then, because of fears that it might generate a [tyranny](#) by the majority. One might

briskly say, therefore, that democracy looks after majorities and liberalism after unpopular minorities.

Like other political doctrines, liberalism is highly sensitive to time and circumstance. Each country's liberalism is different, and it changes in each generation. The historical development of liberalism over recent centuries has been a movement from mistrust of the state's power, on the grounds that it tends to be misused, to a willingness to use the power of government to correct perceived inequities in the [distribution of wealth](#) resulting from economic competition—inequities that purportedly deprive some people of an [equal opportunity](#) to live freely. The expansion of governmental power and responsibility sought by liberals in the 20th century was clearly opposed to the [contraction](#) of government advocated by liberals a century earlier. In the 19th century liberals generally formed the party of business and the entrepreneurial middle class, but for much of the 20th century they were more likely to work to restrict and regulate business in order to provide greater opportunities for labourers and consumers. In each case, however, the liberals' inspiration was the same: a hostility to concentrations of power that threaten the freedom of individuals and prevent them from realizing their full potential, along with a willingness to reexamine and reform social institutions in the light of new needs. This willingness is tempered by an [aversion](#) to sudden, cataclysmic change, which is what sets off the liberal from the [radical](#). It is this very eagerness to welcome and encourage useful change, however, that distinguishes the liberal from the [conservative](#), who believes that change is at least as likely to result in loss as in gain.

Classical liberalism

Political foundations

Although liberal ideas were not noticeable in European politics until the early 16th century, liberalism has a considerable “prehistory” reaching back to the [Middle Ages](#) and even earlier. In the Middle Ages the rights and responsibilities of individuals were determined by their place in a hierarchical social system that placed great stress upon acquiescence and [conformity](#). Under the impact of the slow commercialization and [urbanization](#) of Europe in the later Middle Ages, the [intellectual](#) ferment of the [Renaissance](#), and the spread of [Protestantism](#) in the 16th century, the old [feudal](#) stratification of society gradually began to dissolve,

leading to a fear of instability so powerful that monarchical [absolutism](#) was viewed as the only remedy to civil dissension. By the end of the 16th century, the authority of the [papacy](#) had been broken in most of northern Europe, and rulers tried to consolidate the unity of their realms by enforcing conformity either to [Roman Catholicism](#) or to the ruler's preferred version of Protestantism. These efforts culminated in the [Thirty Years' War](#) (1618–48), which did immense damage to much of Europe. Where no creed succeeded in wholly extirpating its enemies, [toleration](#) was gradually accepted as the lesser of two evils; in some countries where one creed triumphed, it was accepted that too minute a concern with citizens' beliefs was [inimical](#) to prosperity and good order.

The ambitions of national rulers and the requirements of expanding industry and commerce led gradually to the adoption of economic policies based on [mercantilism](#), a school of thought that advocated government intervention in a country's economy to increase state wealth and power. However, as such intervention increasingly served established interests and [inhibited](#) enterprise, it was challenged by members of the newly emerging middle class. This challenge was a significant factor in the great revolutions that rocked [England](#) and France in the 17th and 18th centuries—most notably the [English Civil Wars](#) (1642–51), the [Glorious Revolution](#) (1688), the [American Revolution](#) (1775–83), and the [French Revolution](#) (1789). Classical liberalism as an [articulated](#) creed is a result of those great collisions.



[Thomas Hobbes](#)

In the English Civil Wars, the absolutist king [Charles I](#) was defeated by the forces of [Parliament](#) and eventually executed. The Glorious Revolution resulted in the abdication and exile of [James II](#) and the establishment of a complex form of balanced government in which power was divided between the monarch, ministers, and Parliament. In time this system would become a model for liberal political movements in other countries. The political ideas that helped to inspire these revolts were given formal expression in the work of the English philosophers [Thomas Hobbes](#) and [John Locke](#). In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes argued that the absolute power of the [sovereign](#) was ultimately justified by the consent of the governed, who agreed, in a [hypothetical social contract](#), to obey the sovereign in all matters in exchange for a guarantee of peace and security. Locke also held a social-contract theory of government, but he maintained that the parties to the contract could not reasonably place themselves under the absolute power of a ruler. Absolute rule, he argued, is at odds with the point and justification of political authority, which is that it is necessary to protect the person and property of individuals and to guarantee their [natural rights](#) to freedom of thought, speech, and worship. Significantly, Locke thought that [revolution](#) is justified when the sovereign fails to fulfill these [obligations](#). Indeed, it appears that he began writing his major work of political theory, *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), precisely in order to justify the revolution of two years before.

By the time Locke had published his *Treatises*, politics in England had become a contest between two loosely related parties, [the Whigs and the Tories](#). These parties were the ancestors of Britain's modern [Liberal Party](#) and [Conservative Party](#), respectively. Locke was a notable Whig, and it is conventional to view liberalism as derived from the attitudes of Whig aristocrats, who were often linked with commercial interests and who had an entrenched suspicion of the power of the [monarchy](#). The Whigs dominated English politics from the death of [Queen Anne](#) in 1714 to the accession of King [George III](#) in 1760.

Liberalism and [democracy](#)

The early liberals, then, worked to free individuals from two forms of social constraint—religious conformity and aristocratic privilege—that had been maintained and enforced through the powers of government. The aim of the early liberals was thus to limit the power of government over the individual while holding it accountable to the governed. As Locke and others argued, this required a system of government based on majority rule—that is, one in which government executes

the expressed will of a majority of the electorate. The chief institutional device for attaining this goal was the [periodic election](#) of legislators by popular vote and of a chief [executive](#) by popular vote or the vote of a legislative assembly.



[John Adams](#)

But in answering the crucial question of who is to be the electorate, classical liberalism fell victim to [ambivalence](#), torn between the great emancipating tendencies generated by the revolutions with which it was associated and middle-class fears that a wide or universal franchise would undermine private [property](#). [Benjamin Franklin](#) spoke for the Whig liberalism of the [Founding Fathers](#) of the United States when he stated:

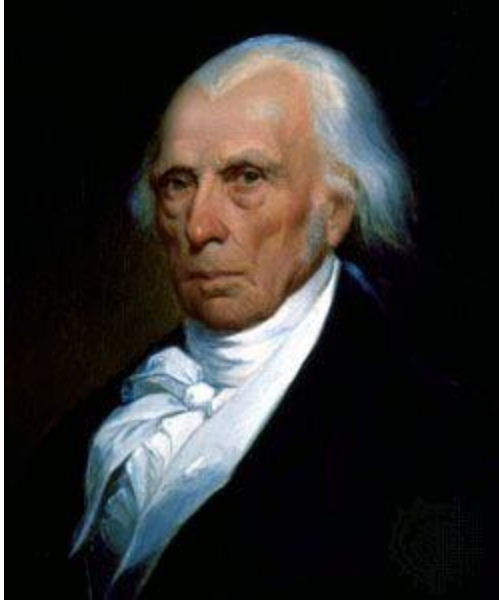
As to those who have no landed property in a county, the allowing them to vote for legislators is an impropriety. They are [transient](#) inhabitants, and not so connected with the welfare of the state, which they may quit when they please, as to qualify them properly for such privilege.

[John Adams](#), in his [*Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*](#) (1787), was more explicit. If the majority were to control all branches of government, he declared, “debts would be abolished first; taxes laid heavy on the rich, and not at all on others; and at last a downright equal division of everything be demanded and voted.” French statesmen such as [François Guizot](#) and [Adophe Thiers](#) expressed similar [sentiments](#) well into the 19th century.

Most 18th- and 19th-century liberal politicians thus feared [popular sovereignty](#). For a long time, consequently, they limited [suffrage](#) to property owners. In Britain even the important [Reform Bill of 1867](#) did not completely abolish property qualifications for the right to vote. In France, despite the ideal of universal male suffrage proclaimed in 1789 and reaffirmed in the [Revolutions of 1830](#), there were no more than 200,000 qualified voters in a population of about 30,000,000 during the reign of [Louis-Philippe](#), the “Citizen King” who had been installed by the ascendant [bourgeoisie](#) in 1830. In the United States, the brave language of the [Declaration of Independence](#) notwithstanding, it was not until 1860 that universal male suffrage prevailed—for whites. In most of Europe, universal male suffrage remained a remote ideal until late in the 19th century. Racial and sexual [prejudice](#) also served to limit the franchise—and, in the case of [slavery](#) in the United States, to deprive large numbers of people of virtually any hope of freedom. Efforts to extend the vote to women met with little success until the early years of the 20th century (see [women’s suffrage](#)). Indeed, Switzerland, which is sometimes called the world’s oldest continuous [democracy](#), did not grant full [voting rights](#) to women until 1971.

Despite the misgivings of men of the propertied classes, a slow but steady expansion of the franchise prevailed throughout Europe in the 19th century—an expansion driven in large part by the liberal insistence that “all men are created equal.” But liberals also had to [reconcile](#) the principle of majority rule with the requirement that the power of the majority be limited. The problem was to accomplish this in a manner consistent with democratic principles. If hereditary elites were discredited, how could the power of the majority be checked without giving disproportionate power to property owners or to some other “natural” elite?

[Separation of powers](#)



[Asher B. Durand: portrait of James Madison](#)

The liberal solution to the problem of limiting the powers of a democratic majority employed various devices. The first was the [separation of powers](#)—i.e., the distribution of power between such functionally [differentiated](#) agencies of government as the [legislature](#), the executive, and the [judiciary](#). This arrangement, and the system of [checks and balances](#) by which it was accomplished, received its classic embodiment in the [Constitution of the United States](#) and its political justification in the [Federalist papers](#) (1787–88), by [Alexander Hamilton](#), [James Madison](#), and [John Jay](#). Of course, such a separation of powers also could have been achieved through a “mixed [constitution](#)”—that is, one in which power is shared by, and governing functions appropriately differentiated between, a monarch, a hereditary chamber, and an elected assembly; this was in fact the system of government in Great Britain at the time of the American Revolution. The U.S. Constitution also contains elements of a mixed constitution, such as the division of the legislature into the popularly elected [House of Representatives](#) and the “aristocratic” [Senate](#), the members of which originally were chosen by the state governments. But it was despotic kings and functionless aristocrats—more functionless in France than in Britain—who thwarted the interests and ambitions of the middle class, which turned, therefore, to the principle of majoritarianism.

[Periodic elections](#)

The second part of the solution lay in using staggered periodic elections to make the decisions of any given majority subject to the [concurrence](#) of other majorities

distributed over time. In the United States, for example, [presidents](#) are elected every four years and members of the House of Representatives every two years, and one-third of the Senate is elected every two years to terms of six years. Therefore, the majority that elects a president every four years or a House of Representatives every two years is different from the majority that elects one-third of the Senate two years earlier and the majority that elects another one-third of the Senate two years later. These bodies, in turn, are “checked” by the Constitution, which was approved and [amended](#) by earlier majorities. In Britain an act of Parliament immediately becomes part of the uncodified constitution; however, before acting on a highly controversial issue, Parliament must seek a popular [mandate](#), which represents a majority other than the one that elected it. Thus, in a [constitutional](#) democracy, the power of a current majority is checked by the verdicts of majorities that precede and follow it.

[Rights](#)

The third part of the solution followed from liberalism’s basic commitment to the freedom and [integrity](#) of the individual, which the limitation of power is, after all, meant to preserve. From the liberal perspective, individuals are not only citizens who share a [social contract](#) with each other but also people with rights upon which the state may not [encroach](#) if majoritarianism is to be meaningful. A majority verdict can come about only if individuals are free to some extent to exchange their views. This involves, beyond the [right](#) to speak and write freely, the freedom to associate and organize and, above all, freedom from fear of reprisal. But individuals also have rights apart from their roles as citizens. These rights secure their personal safety and hence their protection from arbitrary [arrest](#) and [punishment](#). Beyond these rights are those that preserve large areas of privacy. In a liberal [democracy](#) there are affairs that do not concern the state. Such affairs may range from the practice of [religion](#) to the creation of [art](#) and the raising of children by their parents. For liberals of the 18th and 19th centuries they also included most of the activities through which individuals engage in production and trade. [Eloquent](#) declarations affirming such rights were embodied in the British [Bill of Rights](#) (1689), the U.S. Declaration of Independence (1776) and Constitution (ratified 1788), the French [Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen](#) (1789), and the basic documents of countries throughout the world that later used these declarations as their models. These documents and declarations asserted that freedom is more than the

right to cast a [vote](#) in an occasional election; it is the fundamental right of people to live their own lives.

Economic foundations

If the political foundations of liberalism were laid in Great Britain, so too were its [economic](#) foundations. By the 18th century parliamentary constraints were making it difficult for British monarchs to pursue the schemes of national aggrandizement favoured by most rulers on the Continent. These rulers fought for military supremacy, which required a strong economic base. Because the prevailing mercantilist theory understood [international trade](#) as a zero-sum game—in which gain for one country meant loss for another—national governments intervened to determine prices, protect their industries from foreign competition, and avoid the sharing of economic information.



Adam Smith

These practices soon came under liberal challenge. In France a group of thinkers known as the [physiocrats](#) argued that the best way to [cultivate](#) wealth is to allow unrestrained economic competition. Their advice to government was “laissez faire, laissez passer” (“let it be, leave it alone”). This [laissez-faire](#) doctrine found its most thorough and influential exposition in [The Wealth of Nations](#) (1776), by the Scottish economist and philosopher [Adam Smith](#). Free trade benefits all parties, according to Smith, because competition leads to the production of more and better goods at lower prices. Leaving individuals free to pursue their self-interest in an [exchange](#)

[economy](#) based upon a [division of labour](#) will necessarily [enhance](#) the welfare of the group as a whole. Self-seeking individuals become harnessed to the public good because in an exchange economy they must serve others in order to serve themselves. But it is only in a genuinely [free market](#) that this positive consequence is possible; any other arrangement, whether state control or monopoly, must lead to regimentation, exploitation, and economic stagnation.

Every [economic system](#) must determine not only what goods will be produced but also how those goods are to be apportioned, or distributed (see [distribution of wealth and income](#)). In a [market](#) economy both of these tasks are accomplished through the [price](#) mechanism. The theoretically free choices of individual buyers and sellers determine how the resources of society—[labour](#), goods, and capital—shall be employed. These choices [manifest](#) themselves in bids and offers that together determine a commodity's price. Theoretically, when the demand for a commodity is great, prices rise, making it profitable for producers to increase the supply; as supply approximates demand, prices tend to fall until producers divert productive resources to other uses (see [supply and demand](#)). In this way the system achieves the closest possible match between what is desired and what is produced. Moreover, in the distribution of the wealth thereby produced, the system is said to assure a reward in proportion to merit. The assumption is that in a freely competitive economy in which no one is barred from engaging in economic activity, the income received from such activity is a fair measure of its value to society.

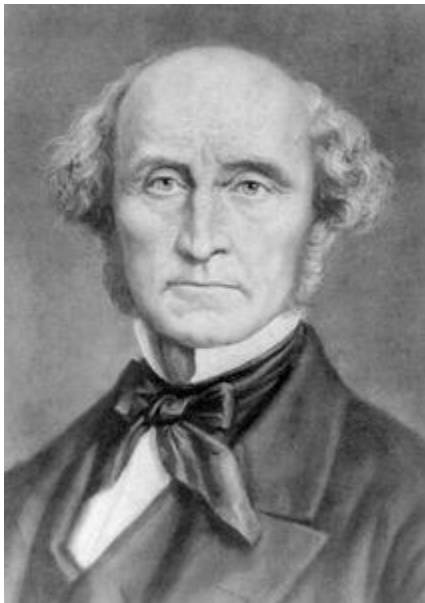
Presupposed in the foregoing account is a [conception](#) of human beings as economic animals rationally and self-interestedly engaged in minimizing costs and maximizing gains. Since individuals know their own interests better than anyone else does, their interests could only be hindered, and never [enhanced](#), by government interference in their economic activities.

In concrete terms, classical liberal economists called for several major changes in the sphere of British and European economic organization. The first was the abolition of numerous feudal and mercantilist restrictions on countries' manufacturing and internal commerce. The second was an end to the [tariffs](#) and restrictions that governments imposed on foreign imports to protect domestic producers. In rejecting the government's regulation of trade, classical [economics](#) was based firmly on a belief in the superiority of a self-regulating market. Quite apart from the cogency of their arguments, the views of Smith and his 19th-century English [successors](#), the economist [David Ricardo](#) and the philosopher and

economist [John Stuart Mill](#), became increasingly convincing as Britain's [Industrial Revolution](#) generated enormous new wealth and made that country into the "workshop of the world." Free trade, it seemed, would make everyone prosperous.

In economic life as in politics, then, the guiding principle of [classical liberalism](#) became an undeviating insistence on limiting the power of government. The English philosopher [Jeremy Bentham](#) cogently summarized this view in his sole advice to the state: "Be quiet." Others asserted that that government is best that governs least. Classical liberals freely acknowledged that government must provide [education](#), sanitation, [law](#) enforcement, a [postal system](#), and other public services that were beyond the capacity of any private [agency](#). But liberals generally believed that, apart from these functions, government must not try to do for individuals what they are able to do for themselves.

Liberalism and [utilitarianism](#)



[John Stuart Mill](#)

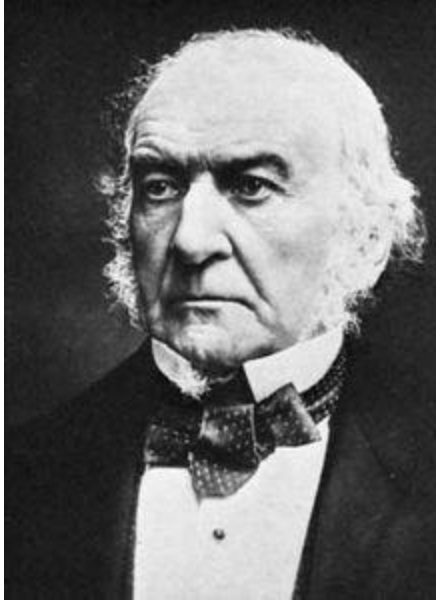
In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Bentham, the philosopher [James Mill](#), and James's son John Stuart Mill applied classical economic principles to the political sphere. [Invoking](#) the doctrine of [utilitarianism](#)—the belief that something has value when it is useful or promotes happiness—they argued that the object of all legislation should be "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." In evaluating what kind of government could best attain this objective, the utilitarians generally supported representative [democracy](#), asserting that it was the best means by

which government could promote the interests of the governed. Taking their cue from the notion of a market economy, the utilitarians called for a [political system](#) that would guarantee its citizens the maximum degree of individual freedom of [choice](#) and action consistent with efficient government and the preservation of social harmony. They advocated expanded education, enlarged [suffrage](#), and periodic elections to ensure government's accountability to the governed. Although they had no use for the idea of [natural rights](#), their defense of individual liberties—including the rights to freedom of religion, [freedom of speech](#), freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly—lies at the heart of modern democracy. These liberties received their classic [advocacy](#) in [John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*](#) (1859), which argues on utilitarian grounds that the state may regulate individual behaviour only in cases where the interests of others would be perceptibly harmed.

The utilitarians thus succeeded in broadening the philosophical foundations of political liberalism while also providing a program of specific reformist goals for liberals to pursue. Their overall political philosophy was perhaps best stated in James Mill's article "Government," which was written for the supplement (1815–24) to the fourth through sixth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

Liberalism in the 19th century

As an [ideology](#) and in practice liberalism became the [preeminent](#) reform movement in Europe during the 19th century. Its fortunes, however, varied with the historical conditions in each country—the strength of the crown, the élan of the [aristocracy](#), the pace of [industrialization](#), and the circumstances of national unification. The national character of a liberal movement could even be affected by religion. Liberalism in Roman Catholic countries such as France, Italy, and Spain, for example, tended to acquire [anticlerical](#) overtones, and liberals in those countries tended to favour legislation restricting the civil authority and political power of the Catholic [clergy](#).



[William Ewart Gladstone](#)

In Great Britain the Whigs had evolved by the mid-19th century into the [Liberal Party](#), whose reformist programs became the model for liberal political parties throughout Europe. Liberals propelled the long campaign that abolished Britain's [slave trade](#) in 1807 and slavery itself throughout the British dominions in 1833. The liberal project of broadening the [franchise](#) in Britain bore fruit in the [Reform Bills of 1832, 1867, and 1884–85](#). The sweeping reforms achieved by Liberal Party governments led by [William Gladstone](#) for 14 years between 1868 and 1894 marked the apex of British liberalism.

Liberalism in continental Europe often lacked the [fortuitous](#) combination of broad popular support and a powerful liberal party that it had in Britain. In France the Revolutionary and Napoleonic governments pursued liberal goals in their abolition of feudal privileges and their [modernization](#) of the decrepit institutions inherited from the [ancien régime](#). After the [Bourbon Restoration](#) in 1815, however, French liberals were faced with the decades-long task of securing [constitutional](#) liberties and enlarging popular participation in government under a reestablished [monarchy](#), goals not substantially achieved until the formation of the [Third Republic](#) in 1871.

Throughout Europe and in the [Western Hemisphere](#), liberalism inspired nationalistic [aspirations](#) to the creation of unified, independent, constitutional states with their own parliaments and the [rule of law](#). The most dramatic exponents of this liberal assault against [authoritarian](#) rule were the [Founding Fathers](#) of the

[United States](#), the statesman and revolutionary [Simón Bolívar](#) in [South America](#), the leaders of the [Risorgimento](#) in Italy, and the nationalist reformer [Lajos Kossuth](#) in Hungary. But the failure of the [Revolutions of 1848](#) highlighted the comparative weakness of liberalism on the Continent. Liberals' inability to unify the German states in the mid-19th century was attributable in large part to the dominant role of a militarized [Prussia](#) and the reactionary influence of Austria. The liberal-inspired unification of Italy was delayed until the 1860s by the armies of Austria and of [Napoleon III](#) of France and by the opposition of the [Vatican](#).

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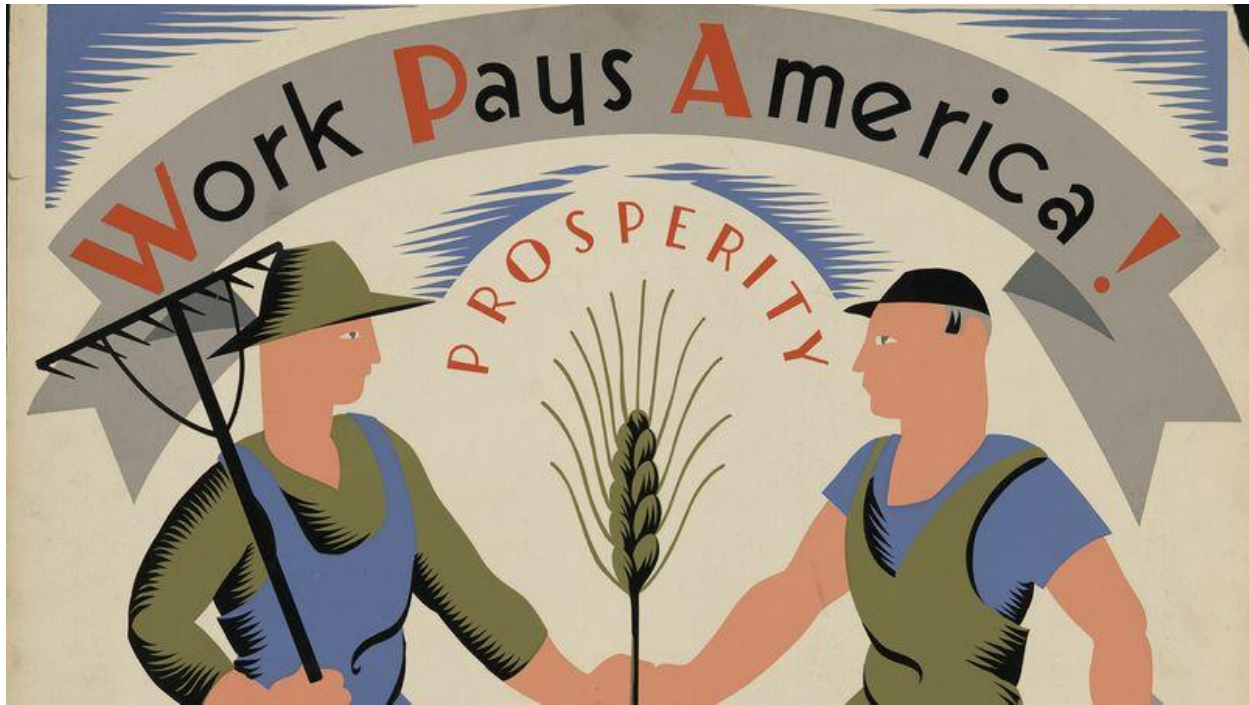
[property law: Marxism, liberalism, and the law](#)

The United States presented a quite different situation, because there was neither a monarchy, an [aristocracy](#), nor an [established church](#) against which liberalism could react. Indeed, liberalism was so well established in the United States' constitutional structure, its [political culture](#), and its [jurisprudence](#) that there was no distinct role for a liberal party to play, at least not until the 20th century.

In Europe, by contrast, liberalism was a transforming force throughout the 19th century. Industrialization and modernization, for which [classical liberalism](#) provided ideological justification, wrought great changes. The [feudal system](#) fell, a functionless aristocracy lost its privileges, and monarchs were challenged and curbed. [Capitalism](#) replaced the static economies of the Middle Ages, and the middle class was left free to employ its energies by expanding the means of production and vastly increasing the wealth of society. As liberals set about limiting the power of the monarchy, they [converted](#) the ideal of [constitutional government](#), accountable to the people through the [election](#) of representatives, into a reality.

Modern liberalism

Problems of [market economies](#)



Discover the origins of liberalism, its relation to democracy, and how modern liberalism differs from classical liberalism and conservatism

[See all videos for this article](#)

By the end of the 19th century, some unforeseen but serious consequences of the [Industrial Revolution](#) in Europe and [North America](#) had produced a deepening disenchantment with the principal economic basis of classical liberalism—the ideal of a market economy. The main problem was that the [profit](#) system had concentrated vast wealth in the hands of a relatively small number of industrialists and financiers, with several adverse consequences. First, great masses of people failed to benefit from the wealth flowing from factories and lived in [poverty](#) in vast slums. Second, because the greatly expanded system of production created many goods and services that people often could not afford to buy, markets became glutted and the system periodically came to a near halt in periods of stagnation that came to be called [depressions](#). Finally, those who owned or managed the means of production had acquired enormous economic power that they used to influence and control government, to manipulate an inchoate electorate, to limit competition, and to obstruct [substantive](#) social reform. In short, some of the same forces that had once released the productive energies of Western society now restrained them; some of the very energies that had demolished the power of [despots](#) now nourished a new despotism.

The modern liberal program

Such, at any rate, was the verdict reached by an increasing number of liberals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As noted above, modern liberals held that the point of government is to remove the obstacles that stand in the way of individual freedom. In this they followed the lead of thinkers and reformers such as the British political philosopher [T.H. Green](#). According to Green, the excessive powers of government may have [constituted](#) the greatest obstacles to freedom in an earlier day, but by the middle of the 19th century these powers had been greatly reduced or [mitigated](#). The time had come, therefore, to recognize hindrances of another kind—such as poverty, disease, [discrimination](#), and ignorance—which individuals could overcome only with the positive assistance of government. The new liberal program was thus to enlist the powers of government in the cause of individual freedom. Society, acting through government, was to establish public schools and [hospitals](#), aid the needy, and regulate working conditions to promote workers' health and well-being, for only through public support could the poor and powerless members of society truly become free.

Although most liberals eventually adopted this new course, there were some dissenters, notably the influential [social Darwinists Herbert Spencer](#) in [England](#) and [William Graham Sumner](#) in the [United States](#). As the term Darwinists indicates, these writers thought of politics, economics, and society in general in [evolutionary](#) terms. Like Paine, they regarded government as at best a necessary evil—not, however, because it [coerces](#) but because it too often interferes with the struggle for survival that nature imposes on [human beings](#) as much as on other species (see [natural selection](#)). Helping the poor and the weak, they argued, impedes individual freedom and retards social progress by holding back the strong and the fit. The social Darwinists concluded that the sole responsibility of government must be to protect the lives and [property](#) of the people—that is, to be nothing more than a “night watchman.”

Limited intervention in the market

Because they appreciated the real achievements of the [market](#) system, modern liberals sought to modify and control the system rather than to abolish it. They saw no reason for a fixed line eternally dividing the private and public sectors of the economy; the division, they contended, must be made by reference to what works.

The spectre of regimentation in centrally [planned economies](#) and the dangers of [bureaucracy](#) even in mixed economies deterred them from [jettisoning](#) the market and substituting a putatively omniscient state. On the other hand—and this is a basic difference between classical and modern liberalism—most liberals came to recognize that the operation of the market needed to be supplemented and corrected. The new liberals asserted, first, that the rewards dispensed by the market were too crude a measure of the contribution most people made to society and, second, that the market ignored the needs of those who lacked opportunity or who were economically exploited. They contended that the enormous social costs incurred in production were not reflected in market prices and that resources were often used wastefully. Not least, liberals perceived that the market [biased](#) the allocation of human and physical resources toward the satisfaction of [consumer](#) appetites—e.g., for automobiles, home appliances, or fashionable clothing—while basic needs—for schools, housing, [public transit](#), and [sewage systems](#), among other things—went unmet. Finally, although liberals believed that prices, [wages](#), and profits should continue to be subject to negotiation among the interested parties and responsive to conventional market pressures, they insisted that price-wage-profit decisions affecting the economy as a whole must be [reconciled](#) with public policy.

Greater equality of wealth and income

To achieve what they took to be a more just [distribution of wealth and income](#), liberals relied on two major strategies. First, they promoted the organization of workers into [trade unions](#) in order to improve their power to bargain with employers. Such a redistribution of power had political as well as economic consequences, making possible a [multiparty system](#) in which at least one party was responsive to the interests of wage earners.

Second, with the political support of the economically deprived, liberals introduced a variety of government-funded [social services](#). Beginning with free public education and [work accident insurance](#), these services later came to include programs of old-age, [unemployment](#), and [health](#) insurance; [minimum-wage](#) laws; and support for the physically and mentally handicapped (*see also* [social insurance](#); [social welfare program](#)). Meeting these objectives required a redistribution of wealth that was to be achieved by a graduated [income tax](#) and [inheritance tax](#), which affected the wealthy more than they did the poor. Social welfare measures such as these were first enacted by the decidedly non-liberal government of [Otto](#)

[von Bismarck](#) in Germany in the late 19th century, but liberal governments soon adopted them in other countries of northern and western Europe. In the United States such measures were not adopted at the federal level until passage of the [Social Security Act](#) of 1935.

World War I and the Great Depression

The further development of liberalism in Europe was brutally interrupted in 1914–18 by the prolonged slaughter of [World War I](#). The [war](#) overturned four of Europe's great imperial dynasties—Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Ottoman Turkey—and thus at first appeared to give added [impetus](#) to liberal [democracy](#). Europe was reshaped by the [Treaty of Versailles](#) on the principle of national self-determination, which in practice meant the breakup of the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires into nationally [homogeneous](#) states. The [League of Nations](#) was created in the hope that negotiation would replace war as a means of settling international disputes.

But the trauma of the war had created widespread disillusionment about the entire liberal view of progress toward a more humane world. The harsh peace terms imposed by the victorious Allies, together with the misery created by the [Great Depression](#), beginning in 1929, enfeebled Germany's newly established [Weimar Republic](#) and set the stage for the [Nazi](#) seizure of power in 1933. In Italy, meanwhile, dissatisfaction with the peace settlement led directly to the takeover by the Fascist Party in 1922. Liberalism was also threatened by Soviet [communism](#), which seemed to many to have [inherited](#) the hopes for progress earlier associated with liberalism itself.

While liberalism came under political attack in the interwar period, the Great Depression threatened the very survival of the market economy. The boom-and-bust character of the [business cycle](#) had long been a major defect of market economies, but the Great Depression, with its seemingly endless downturn in business activity and its soaring levels of [unemployment](#), confounded classical economists and produced real pessimism about the viability of [capitalism](#).



[Franklin D. Roosevelt](#)

The wrenching hardships inflicted by the Great [Depression](#) eventually convinced Western governments that complex modern societies needed some measure of rational [economic planning](#). The [New Deal](#) (1933–39), the domestic program undertaken by Pres. [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) to lift the United States out of the Great Depression, typified modern liberalism in its [vast](#) expansion of the scope of governmental activities and its increased regulation of business. Among the measures that New Deal legislation provided were emergency assistance and temporary jobs to the unemployed, restrictions on banking and financial industries, more power for trade unions to organize and bargain with employers, and establishment of the [Social Security](#) program of retirement benefits and unemployment and disability insurance. In his influential work [The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money](#) (1936), the liberal British economist [John Maynard Keynes](#) introduced an economic theory that argued that government management of the economy could smooth out the highs and lows of the business cycle to produce more or less consistent growth with minimal unemployment.

Postwar liberalism to the 1960s

Liberalism, in strategic alliance with Soviet communism, ultimately triumphed over [fascism](#) in [World War II](#), and liberal [democracy](#) was reestablished in [West Germany](#), Italy, and Japan. As western Europe, [North America](#), and Japan entered a period of steady [economic growth](#) and unprecedented prosperity after the war, attention shifted to the institutional factors that prevented such economies from fully

realizing their productive potential, especially during periods of mass unemployment and depression. Great Britain, the United States, and other Western industrialized nations committed their national governments to promoting full employment, the maximum use of their industrial capacity, and the maximum purchasing power of their citizenry. The old [rhetoric](#) about “sharing the wealth” gave way to a concentration on growth rates, as liberals—inspired by Keynes—used the government’s power to [borrow](#), [tax](#), and spend not merely to counter contractions of the business cycle but to encourage expansion of the economy. Here, clearly, was a program less disruptive of class harmony and the basic [consensus](#) essential to a democracy than the old [Robin Hood](#) method of taking from the rich and giving to the poor.



[Lyndon B. Johnson](#)



[Clement Attlee](#)

A further and final expansion of social welfare programs occurred in the liberal [democracies](#) during the postwar decades. Notable measures were undertaken in Britain by the Labour government of Prime Minister [Clement Attlee](#) and in the United States by the Democratic administration of Pres. [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) as part of his [Great Society](#) program of national reforms. These measures created the modern [welfare state](#), which provided not only the usual forms of social insurance but also pensions, unemployment benefits, subsidized medical care, family allowances, and government-funded [higher education](#). By the 1960s social welfare was thus provided “from the cradle to the grave” throughout much of western Europe—particularly in the Scandinavian countries—and in Japan and Canada and to a lesser extent in the United States.

The liberal democratic model was adopted in Asia and Africa by most of the new nations that emerged from the dissolution of the British and French colonial empires in the 1950s and early '60s. The new nations almost invariably adopted constitutions and established parliamentary governments, believing that these institutions would lead to the same freedom and prosperity that had been achieved in Europe. The results, however, were mixed, with genuine [parliamentary democracy](#) taking root in some countries but [succumbing](#) in many others to military or [socialist dictatorships](#).

Contemporary liberalism

The revival of classical liberalism

The three decades of unprecedented general prosperity that the Western world experienced after [World War II](#) marked the high tide of modern liberalism. But the slowing of [economic growth](#) that gripped most Western countries beginning in the mid-1970s presented a serious challenge to modern liberalism. By the end of that decade economic stagnation, combined with the cost of maintaining the social benefits of the [welfare state](#), pushed governments increasingly toward politically [untenable](#) levels of taxation and mounting debt. Equally troubling was the fact that the [Keynesian economics](#) practiced by many governments seemed to lose its effectiveness. Governments continued to spend [money](#) on programs aimed at

stimulating economic growth, but the result too often was increased [inflation](#) and ever-smaller declines in [unemployment](#) rates.



[F.A. Hayek](#)

As modern liberals struggled to meet the challenge of stagnating [living standards](#) in mature industrial economies, others saw an opportunity for a revival of [classical liberalism](#). The [intellectual](#) foundations of this revival were primarily the work of the Austrian-born British economist [F.A. Hayek](#) and the American economist [Milton Friedman](#). One of Hayek's greatest achievements was to demonstrate, on purely logical grounds, that a [centrally planned economy](#) is impossible. He also famously argued, in *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), that interventionist measures aimed at the redistribution of wealth lead inevitably to [totalitarianism](#). Friedman, as one of the founders of the modern [monetarist](#) school of economics, held that the [business cycle](#) is determined mainly by the supply of money and by [interest](#) rates, rather than by government [fiscal policy](#)—contrary to the long-prevailing view of Keynes and his followers. These arguments were enthusiastically embraced by the major [conservative](#) political parties in Britain and the [United States](#), which had never abandoned the classical liberal [conviction](#) that the [market](#), for all its faults, guides [economic policy](#) better than governments do. Revitalized [conservatives](#) achieved power with the lengthy administrations of Prime Minister [Margaret Thatcher](#) (1979–90) in Britain and Pres. [Ronald Reagan](#) (1981–89) in the United States. Their [ideology](#) and policies, which properly belong to the history of [conservatism](#) rather than liberalism, became increasingly influential, as illustrated by the British [Labour Party](#)'s official abandonment of its commitment to the “common ownership of the

means of production” in 1995 and by the cautiously [pragmatic](#) policies of Pres. [Bill Clinton](#) in the 1990s. The clearest sign, however, of the importance of this “neoclassical” version of liberalism was the emergence of [libertarianism](#) as a political force—as evidenced by the increasing prominence of the [Libertarian Party](#) in the United States and by the creation of assorted think tanks in various countries, which sought to promote the libertarian ideal of markets and sharply limited governments.

[Civil rights](#) and social issues



[civil rights movement](#)

Contemporary liberalism remains deeply concerned with reducing economic inequalities and helping the poor, but it also has tried to extend individual rights in new directions. With the exception of the utilitarians, liberals have always [invoked](#) the concept of rights to argue against [tyranny](#) and oppression; but in the later 20th century claims to rights became the most common way of [articulating](#) struggles for [social justice](#). The prototypical mass movement in this regard was the American [civil rights movement](#) of the 1950s and '60s, which resulted in legislation forbidding most forms of [discrimination](#) against a large [African American](#) minority and which fundamentally altered the climate of race relations in the United States. In the 1970s there arose similar movements struggling for [equal rights](#) for [women](#), [gays and lesbians](#), the physically or mentally disabled, and other minorities or disadvantaged social groups. Thus, liberalism historically has sought to foster a plurality of different ways of life, or different [conceptions](#) of the “good life,” by protecting the rights and interests of first the middle class and religious minorities, then the working class and the poor, and finally racial minorities, women, gays and lesbians, and the physically or mentally disabled.

Liberalism has influenced the changing character of Western society in other ways as well, though its contribution in this regard has not always been distinguishable from the effects of modernization, technological change, and rising standards of living. For example, the relaxation in most developed countries of long-standing restrictions on [contraception](#), [divorce](#), [abortion](#), and [homosexuality](#) was inspired in part by the traditional liberal insistence on individual [choice](#). In similar fashion, the liberal emphasis on the [right](#) to [freedom of speech](#) led to the loosening of inherited restrictions on sexual content and expression in works of art and [culture](#) (see [censorship](#)).

Legacy and prospects

Liberalism remains a vibrant and influential, if divided, [political ideology](#). In the two decades following the elections of Thatcher and Reagan in 1979–80, modern liberalism appeared to be in dispirited decline. Most sectors of the British and American economies during this period were deregulated or privatized to effect what Reagan called “the magic of the marketplace.” Unregulated markets, it was claimed, produce prosperity, abundance, and economic [efficiencies](#). In keeping with this vision, regulations governing the banking, insurance, and financial industries—many in place since the New Deal—were watered down or eliminated in the 1980s and ’90s. The resulting lack of oversight was a major factor in a worldwide financial crisis that began in 2007–08 and threatened to turn into a global [depression](#). Almost overnight, the ideal of the unregulated [market](#) was discredited in the eyes of many. Newly elected U.S. Pres. [Barack Obama](#) undertook, with widespread popular support, a “new New Deal” in which banks were re-regulated and the [automobile industry](#) radically (albeit temporarily) restructured. Formerly overshadowed, modern liberalism had gained a new lease on life. That moment proved transitory, however, as Obama’s successor, [Donald Trump](#), [repudiated](#) and set about undoing many of the regulations that the Obama administration had put in place.

[Max Lerner](#)’s article on liberalism appeared in the 14th edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (see Britannica Classic: liberalism).