

# Collapse or Triumph? The Modern American Conservative Movement at Sixty

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**Just how powerful, unified, and successful was and is American conservatism? Arguably, the conservative movement has been one of the most powerful and successful uprisings in twentieth-century American history and perhaps the whole of US history. However, reassessing its sixty-year trajectory raises serious questions about its past, present, and future trajectories. In retrospect, this juggernaut looks fragmented, disjointed, and contested. Moreover, the movement and the Republican Party that houses it also seems fractured since conservatives have struggled to govern in the past, are struggling now, and will most likely struggle in the foreseeable future. As such, there is currently a need to reexamine persistent historical myths about conservatism's rise as well as liberalism's supposed fall in order to best understand how the American experiment has and will continue to unfold.**

- 1 "One hundred and four years of history is in the balance," pundit George Will warned in December 2015. "If [Donald] Trump is the Republican nominee in 2016, there might not be a conservative party in 2020 either" (Will). The conservative columnist was just one of many right-wing beltway insiders warning about the state and future of the GOP and conservative movement, the two having become almost synonymous years before. Many journalists regardless of their political tilt, shared those predictions (cf. Masket). Democrats and those on the left certainly hoped the GOP would implode (cf. Magary; Gabriel; Geoghegan; Sargeant). Some even guessed that Trump had run to ensure Hillary Clinton's victory. Much of these rumors rested on questionable evidence. The real-estate mogul had, up until recently, been friendly with the Clintons, even donating to their foundation. He had also gone on record for years in support of abortion, an assault weapons ban, and government healthcare (cf. Cohen; Moyer; Schwarz; Budowsky; Scott). Nothing about candidate Trump, however, smacked of a centrist Democrat dressed up in a conservative's clothing. The reality-TV star wanted to build a wall between the US and Mexico, repeal the Affordable Care Act, and ban Muslims. He also decried the free-trade agreements many conservatives consider sacrosanct. His connections to organized religion, particularly the evangelical denominations, were tenuous at best. His racist, sexist, xenophobic statements, threats, and campaign promises openly contradicted the more polite, supposedly color-blind, conservatism that has veiled the Republican Party's regressive policies in recent decades. Trump's incendiary tweets alone seemed likely to doom already failing efforts in recent years to turn the GOP into a welcoming big tent for right-ward leaning Americans, regardless of their gender, race, or sexual orientation (cf. Shapiro; Chideya; Samuelsohn; "Trump's Promises"). Many experts predicted Clinton would soundly defeat him. Trump, in fact, spent the final days of the campaign alleging it had been rigged against him. So he seemed

both surprised and some even said humbled on Election Night to discover that he had won (cf. Sherman; Stevenson; Tufekci). Trump's victory shouldn't seem all that surprising to scholars of American politics, especially of the Right. His win was hardly foreordained, but his primary and general election triumphs fit with the trajectory of American conservatism that has been unearthed in recent decades as well as with how the GOP and American politics have evolved. From that perspective, both his candidacy and Electoral College success seem decades in the making even if the outcome was anything but certain on Election Day. Trump's win may nevertheless represent the death knell of American conservatism but also point to a much-needed reconsideration of the trajectory of twentieth-century US politics. The movement had seemed to be in trouble before 2016. Top conservatives have worried about party disunity for years. David Frum, for example, famously warned during the 2008 primaries that the three-legged stool of American conservatism more than wobbled and could actually fall apart. Republicans increasingly appeared publicly and privately (perhaps even irreconcilably) divided over the movement and party's economic, social, and foreign policy agendas. Those party planks actually conflicted with one another. Cutting spending, as the business-minded Right wanted, hardly pleased hawks who wanted aggressive engagement in international affairs or the devout Republicans who often needed social welfare programs. Indeed, the latter's children more often enlisted since military service offered them benefits and opportunities, which low-income civilians rarely had (cf. Frum). Disunity could be seen in divisive, crowded primaries. Republicans in 2008, 2012, and 2016 struggled to find someone from within the party ranks capable of easily winning over the base in the primaries and prevailing in the general race (cf. "Protest Votes"; Hamby; Enten). Trump, in fact, failed to win a majority of voters in early contests but prevailed because the electorate's votes were split amongst the many other candidates. As such, he in fact set a record for both the votes made for and against him (cf. Bump). Those results indicated trouble for the party but also the conservative movement. Trump, after all, prevailed despite rarely calling himself a conservative. He still made headlines on the rare occasion when he did so because those soundbites fed the raging debate in the press over his right-wing bona fides. But those disagreements hardly alarmed a sizeable number of voters in the primary and general elections (cf. Fund; Martin and Nagourney; Politi). That disinterest matters. Experts have, after all, often considered the differences amongst conservatives a reason for their eventual triumph. Yet that assumption is relatively new, as historians Kim Phillips-Fein, Julian Zelizer, and Elizabeth Tandy Shermer have pointed out in literature reviews. Few historians studied the American Right and conservatism before the late-1990s. Post-WW II scholars, the so-called consensus school, asserted that American political traditions could be traced directly back to John Locke and Adam Smith. Such experts, like Richard Hofstadter, dismissed the postwar Right as mentally ill pseudo-conservatives, who, according to Arthur Schlesinger Jr., had no place in what he called *The Vital Center* (see Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism"; Zelizer; Shermer, "American Conservatism") Very few scholars, as Phillips-Fein, Zelizer, and Shermer noted, took the Right or its history seriously in the 1960s and 1970s, when a later generation of experts would consider the movement making serious strides in

national politics. But those decades' faculty and graduate students ignored those political upheavals and instead sought to rehabilitate the history of the American Left, which was also on the move in the 1960s and 1970s. Such accounts also tended to focus on capturing the lived experiences of ordinary immigrants, residents, and citizens. New Left scholars tended to consider liberals and moderates to be the ones stopping past grassroots social-democratic uprisings both throughout American history and certainly during the Vietnam era. Such experts rarely saw anyone to the right of liberal Democratic president Lyndon Baines Johnson, even though he ran against conservative icon Barry Goldwater in 1964. Only a few historians researched the Right in the socio-cultural turn's heyday. James Patterson and George Nash stood out at the time for arguing conservatism could be found everywhere. Patterson wrote a 1967 study of Congressional conservatives and a 1972 biography of Ohio Senator Robert Taft. Both books emphasized the power and appeal of conservatives in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, when consensus scholars had proclaimed liberalism's triumph (see Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism*; Patterson, *Mr. Republican*; Nash). His focus on politics contrasted somewhat with Nash, an intellectual historian who also happened to be a conservative. His 1976 *Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945* asserted that the Right lacked a sizeable, substantial following. He instead depicted the conservative movement as an elite, thinking man's fight against liberalism, which intellectuals had forged out of a coalition of complimentary but often conflicting concerns over foreign, social, and economic policies. Hence, this drive included the rigid social order, rule of law, aversion to rapid change, and sense of tradition that classical conservatives held dear but also the business-first mantra and aggressive foreign policy that so-called Burkeans eyed with suspicion. Nash's analysis of what brought critics of liberalism together has largely endured, as historian Jennifer Burns has noted (see "In Retrospect"). Such persistence often reflects what was making headlines when historians were writing (though a handful of path-breaking books have appeared just as public conversations about the Right and larger character of American politics were changing). Scholars, for example, began to seriously grapple with the Right's supposedly newfound power during the Reagan and first Bush presidencies when a new generation of historians proposed that the New Deal order may very well have come to an end. Yet the essays in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle's landmark 1989 edited collection, *Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*, largely grappled with liberalism's failures, not the Right's ascendancy, which reflected many of the authors' New Left roots (see Shermer, "Who is Wagging Whom?"; Fraser and Gerstle). That supposition held sway well during the 1990s and into the early 2000s. Political pundits blaming blue-collar workers for Reagan's triumph and later Republican upsets very much shaped this era's historical accounts of longstanding liberal, blue-collar, and suburban disinterest in progressive taxation, ending segregation, and attempting integration. Thomas Sugrue's, Lisa McGirr's, Becky Nicolaides's, and Robert Self's respective studies of Detroit, Southern California, and Oakland also seemed to indicate there had been a nationwide, not just Southern, backlash as civil rights, feminist, and antiwar organizations began to advance their agenda in the 1960s and 1970s (see Shermer, "Who is Wagging Whom?"; Shermer, "Whither the Right?"; Sugrue; McGirr;

Nicolaides; Self). These scholarly indictments of moderates and trade unionists evolved into a veritable renaissance on the history of the American Right in the years after Republicans took control of Congress in the mid-1990s. A Democratic president ended up signing repeals of New Deal banking and welfare legislation, which had seemed to complete the so-called Reagan Revolution but also indicate how far to the right, not just the center, the Democrats had drifted. Phillips-Fein, Zelizer, and Shermer have all pointed out that studies of the actual Right, not just its increasing attractiveness to former Democratic voters, dominated the field of recent American history in the 2000s and early 2010s, when Republicans seemed to have tremendous power on Capitol Hill (see Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism"; Zelizer; Shermer, "American Conservatism"). Some of the new millennium's work, including Patrick Allitt's 2010 *Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History*, looked far back into American history to uncover the importance of conservatism to American political traditions, but the majority of research published in the 2000s explored the post-WW II period. Scholars often sought to understand what drew critics of modern American liberalism together, despite their differences, and ensured their presumed triumph. Such historians reflected Nash's overarching sense of the movement as a coalition but spent little time on intellectuals. This cohort instead presumed the Right to have come from grassroots and forged of white middle- and working-class Americans. That general thesis could be found in countless, thoughtful case studies of Steelbelt, Southern, and Pacific Coast city dwellers and suburbanites revolting against taxation, afraid of Communist subversion, or fleeing integrated neighborhoods and schools. Matthew Lassiter's, Kevin Kruse's, Edward Miller's, and many other historians' case studies rarely placed a subdivision in a regional, let alone national, context but instead encouraged arguments that a particular place birthed the entire movement (see Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism"; Zelizer; Shermer, "American Conservatism"; Allitt; Lassiter; Kruse; Miller). The literature shifted again in the early 2010s. A new generation of historians, including Burns and Angus Burgin, revived Nash's emphasis on intellectuals but also drew attention to the power and importance of business executives, which again emphasized the increasing news headlines of corporate power and rising inequality in the US. Another set of experts, most notably Darren Dochuk, focused on the Right's relationship to organized religion. A different cohort, including Angela Dillard and Michael Ondaatje, also drew more attention to the understudied so-called multi-cultural conservatives, who had started to become an increasing presence in the GOP's leadership in the 1990s and 2000s (see Shermer, "Whither the Right?"; Burns, "Godless Capitalism"; Burgin; Dochuk; Dillard; Ondaatje).

19 As a result, by the mid-2010s, conservatism seemed to have in fact been everywhere in postwar America. Scholars had tacitly reached a consensus that the movement had drawn on long political traditions but had always been divided because this coalition had been forged out of many different and conflicting reactions to the New Deal (see Shermer, "Whither the Right?"). Yet that basic timeline did not change historical understandings of the twentieth century. It operated on the basic presumption that there had once been a triumphant liberal order, which gave way to a seemingly hegemonic conservative movement. That chronology nevertheless chafed against the actual evidence unearthed over the

past twenty years, when it became increasingly apparent that the coalition-building responsible for the movement increasingly limited and even threatened it. Historians need to fundamentally reconsider the trajectory of US politics. Liberalism now looks to have always been embattled even at its supposed mid-twentieth-century high watermark. Intellectual historians have, after all, pointed out that consensus scholars like Hofstadter, Schlesinger, and even Daniel Bell desperately proclaimed there to be a liberal order since they recognized the threat of right-wing thinkers like Peter Viereck, Russell Kirk, and William Buckley, who disagreed vehemently with each other (cf. Burns, "Liberalism"). Researchers have also shown that postwar liberals knew that 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s Democratic reform efforts had actually fallen short because many Americans, all over the country, were skeptical of, opposed to, and defiant of a stronger federal government, progressive taxation, guaranteed social welfare, equal opportunity, and more citizen participation (see Fraser and Gerstle ix–xxv). Postwar reactionaries arguably had their greatest successes when they came together as conservatives and conspired to take over the GOP. Many experts, including Nash, Phillips-Fein, and Burns, have emphasized that Buckley and his magazine *National Review* played a pivotal role in asserting that liberalism's critics had a common heritage, which defied their disagreements over economic, social, and international affairs and represented something far more modern and serious than the Old Right. By the mid-1950s, the Old Right had become a label for the white (largely Protestant) xenophobes who Hofstadter and Schlesinger had proclaimed to be backwards relics of a bygone era. Many Americans uneasy with or outright opposed to liberalism embraced Buckley's fusionist endeavor. Top executives bankrolled the costly scheme, Americans eagerly subscribed, and headlining retrograde politicians were profiled as they increasingly embraced the label conservative (see Nash; Burns, "Godless Capitalism"; Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*). That roster included Goldwater, who scholars now recognize as a seminal figure in the Right's rise. The Senator started to describe himself as a conservative in the mid-1950s. He previously talked more about free-enterprise to distinguish himself from liberal Republicans and Democrats. Economic policy remained his primary concern. As such, his best-selling *Conscience of a Conservative* more reflected Buckley's fusionist politics since the publisher's brother-in-law ghostwrote the 1960 book. Many recent histories of the Right point to the movement coming together to ensure Goldwater received the GOP's presidential nomination in 1964, which provided conservatives with a sizeable suburban base. The Arizonan still lost that battle but Reagan would win the war for conservatives just sixteen years later after the movement expanded into a victorious majority (see Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism*; Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*; Perlstein; R. Goldberg). This literature's evidentiary base points to a political trajectory that was anything but neat, tidy, or triumphant. Some divisions amongst the Right could not be overcome, which, in turn, weakened a coalition that now looks somewhat fragile. As Burns noted, Buckley's fusionism, for example, had no room for either anti-communist, atheist novelist Ayn Rand or devout, anti-capitalist, anti-communist writer Whittaker Chambers, both of whom had a sizeable number of devotees (see Burns, "Godless Capitalism"). Experts, including Robert Goldberg and Rick Perlstein, have also recognized but not made much of Buckley and other top

conservatives' difficulties making room for right-wing populists. Such firebrands seemed to threaten the movement's respectability and the GOP's viability. As such, Buckley openly denounced many of the small right-wing groups embracing the label conservative across the country. He even attacked the largest one, the stridently anti-communist John Birch Society that retired candy manufacturer Robert Welch had founded. Buckley's attacks did not stop members from working to ensure Goldwater's 1964 nomination. As such, the Arizonan did not denounce them but implicitly acknowledged them in his acceptance speech. He privately raised concerns about men and women whom Buckley and other pundits labeled 'ultras' but also insisted he could not turn his back on the people who had been so pivotal to his political career in Arizona and then in Washington (see R. Goldberg; Perlstein). Evidence suggests that right-wing populists in fact proved more of a threat than a liability or asset to modern conservatism since they so often proved fractious and divisive. Kruse, Miller, and Shermer's research has shown that these uprisings certainly thwarted liberal and left-wing activists in the 1960s and 1970s but also frustrated GOP leaders, whom right-wing renegades considered to be betraying the movement's core values of freedom, democracy, and free enterprise. At the local and state level, rebels voted down ballot referenda for infrastructure projects, tax cuts for businesses, and civil rights ordinances, no matter how toothless. They also crowded town hall meetings to demand welfare cuts, property tax repeals for homeowners, obscenity laws, and religious freedom protections. When they ran for office, they, like Trump in 2016, shocked the pundits and pollsters by doing well, sometimes winning primaries against mainstream Republicans and then prevailing in general elections, much to the chagrin of conservative leaders, moderate voters, and left-leaning activists (see Kruse; Miller; Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism*). As such, renegades like Georgian Lester Maddox, Arizonan Ev Mecham, and Alabaman George Wallace now seem an important bellwether to the challenges that seemed likely to tear the movement and GOP apart in the new millennium (see Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism*; Kruse; Kazin, *Populist Persuasion* 221–44). The latter, as Michael Kazin noted, troubled both Democrats and Republicans in the 1968 presidential election. Wallace ran on three other occasions for the Democratic nomination but sought the office as an independent against Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon. Wallace combined coded racist appeals with celebrations of the hard-working everyman. He also disdained liberals who condescended to the common folk, called for the God-fearing to lead the nation, and demanded both freedom from government interference and an authoritarian policy of law and order. Wallace, like Trump now, appealed to Americans who shared the belief that "there is not a dime's worth of difference" between parties in the nation's "Tweedledee and Tweedledum system" (Kazin, *Populist Persuasion* 240). Almost 10 million Americans voted for Wallace in 1968, or 13.5 percent of the electorate—enough to secure forty-six electoral votes from five states in the Deep South, a region that Nixon aides and historians have insisted that he won through the GOP's infamous Southern strategy (221–44). Historians have also largely ignored Ross Perot's 1992 presidential run. He has been as absent in the literature on the 1990s as Goldwater once was in work on the 1960s. Even historian Margaret O'Mara paid little attention to the Texan in her recent look at the race, despite his

taking 19 percent of the popular vote (though he received nothing from the Electoral College). The straight-talking billionaire pulled off that coup by pioneering the use of cable TV to broadcast his message, somewhat reminiscent of how Trump perfected the use of Twitter in the months leading up to the 2016 election. Perot frequently appeared on CNN, whose novel twenty-four-hour infotainment news platform could then hardly have been dismissed as lamestream media, the preferred phrase of many right-wing pundits today. His agenda confused many pundits since it combined policies from both right and left. He defended abortion rights, called for a balanced budget and gun control, and predicted a “giant sucking sound” of jobs to Mexico if NAFTA were enacted (O’ Mara 157–202). A Perot presidency would have been as unpredictable as Trump’s. Neither had held elective office before their campaigns, nor enjoyed support from leaders in either major party. Both candidates could hardly expect such support. Neither had any real reverence for either liberalism or conservatism, nor did the voters who embraced them. Such parallels suggest that scholars need to delve deep into the past in order to better understand the origins of the new millennium’s politics since many reported surprise at the 2016 results. Recent elections suggest that political terms, including left and right as well as liberal and conservative, have far less meaning at a moment when partisanship seemed to increase, party membership continued to decline, and voter turnout remained alarmingly low. Those long-term trends were critical to Trump’s candidacy in the general election. The real-estate magnate prevailed in the primaries, in which only nine percent of the electorate participated. Yet that engagement reflected an increase in recent years (see Parlapiano and Pearce). Nevertheless, a party outsider won because the GOP, meaning self-proclaimed conservatives, were so divided amongst themselves—as they have always been—that primary voters couldn’t agree on a candidate from their established ranks, much to the frustration of party and movement leaders. Discord has and will likely continue to frustrate the conservatives’ and Trump’s conflicting agendas. In 2017, he tried to do much through executive orders and changes to administrative procedure. That approach could have a real impact on environmental, education, and health-care policies. Yet this method cannot end Medicare, privatize public schools, take apart the Environmental Protection Agency, or build a wall on the US-Mexico border. Such drastic changes would require party unity long absent from a GOP, which has small Congressional majorities. That reality stymied efforts to repeal Obamacare (see Levitz; Gibson; Sanger-Katz) and almost derailed the frantic effort at the end of Trump’s first year in office to quickly pass the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act in order to prove the party was capable of governing with the 2020 midterms looming (see Tankersley and Kaplan; Tankersley and Rappeport; Sullivan, DeBonis, and Paletta). Recent histories of the Right provide evidence that such gridlock is hardly new but have largely failed to grapple with its long-term meaning for American politics. For example, only a few recent accounts of the Reagan Administration, including Meg Jacobs and Julian Zelizer’s recent book *Conservatives in Power*, have noted how much of its agenda was frustrated both in and outside Washington. Experts in other disciplines and fields of inquiry have done far more to show that conservatives never achieved everything they sought. Bruce Schulman, Nick Witham, and Mark Silverstein have shown, for

example, that Nixon struggled to impose his preferred policies, Reagan could not evade public outrage over US interference in Latin American countries, and later conservative presidents had a difficult time appointing Supreme Court justices that would satisfy both their base and the Senate (see Schulman; Witham; Silverstein). Such insights reflect how much the scholarship on the Right has reshaped other literatures in the 2000s and 2010s. Scholars of the Left, like Kazin, have been offering a much clearer sense of how effectively politicians and policymakers have appealed to and repelled Americans voters from both parties (see Kazin, *American Dreamers*). New attention on the Christian left very much reflects a growing inclination to go back and look at the history of American liberalism and radicalism. Research by Kazin and Doug Rossinow indicates moderates, liberals, and progressives did much to frustrate the Nixon, Reagan, and Bush agendas. None of these men got the full tax and spending cuts that they promised, nor were they able to outlaw abortion, mandate prayer in public schools, or defang the environmental movement (see Kazin, *In Search*; Rossinow). These conservatives' eagerness to devolve more power back to state and local governments in the past now seems to have enabled contemporary local leaders and groups to pass legislation that combats climate change, improves health care, and advances gay rights. Those progressive successes help explain why liberals, moderates, and the left have represented the majority of the electorate since the late 2000s when Democrats have generally been winning the popular vote for the presidency, Senate, and House (see Nir). New historical work on the middle and left of the US political spectrum as well as the field of policy history also demonstrates that Bernie Sanders's primary bid and Hillary Clinton's general election loss were neither foreordained nor surprising. Rossinow, Kazin, and Jonathan Bell have, for example, uncovered sustained left-wing opposition to centrist Democrats, like Bill Clinton, who have sought to pull the party to the right or keep it in the middle even after Southerners began to drift increasingly toward the GOP after the mid-1960s. As such, historians have started to uncover just how divided Democrats as well as unaffiliated liberals, moderates, and progressives have been and remain (see Rossinow; Kazin, *In Search*; Bell). Scholars interested in the nuts and bolts of governance, including Douglas Smith, have provided insights into why the electoral system is somewhat stacked against all Democrats. Redistricting, gerrymandering, and voting restrictions have given Republicans a narrow majority of seats at the local, state, and federal level irrespective of the electorate's actual political makeup (see Smith).

39 Studies of the past also indicate such barriers can be surmounted. Accounts of midterm elections have continually shown that popular outrage can do much to frustrate presidents and parties as well as build movements. As Patterson noted in the mid-1960s, the conservative coalition did much to frustrate Roosevelt and lay the seeds for a postwar insurgency in the wake of the 1938 results (see Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism*). No one can be sure if the outrage over Trump's Muslim ban, Republicans' promise to repeal Obamacare, and conservatives' insistence that the government defund Planned Parenthood will enable Democrats to retake Congress (see Harrington; Stelloh; Dwyer). Yet such widespread efforts to resist these and other efforts may be enough to forestall the competing right-wing agendas and perhaps stop the president from becoming the kind of demagogue



other right-wing populists became at the local and state level. Either outcome would indicate the American political landscape's continued evolution. Much work remains to be done to understand how politicians, unelected officials, and activists but also apathetic and disenfranchised citizens have continually reconfigured the country's politics, economy, and society. Scholars have an important role to play in ensuring that people today and in the future understand how and why politics continues to be transformed. Yet their accounts should not be bogged down in incremental revisions of longstanding assumptions. Narratives, particularly those written for popular audiences or told to students in lecture halls, must offer a profound revision of twentieth-century American history, which jettisons the idea that there was a liberal consensus over which conservatism triumphed. Only such a wholesale reconsideration of what experts have presumed to be true about American politics will enable this and future generations to understand that Trump's 2016 victory did not represent the Right's inevitable triumph but instead represented how much a tenuous postwar coalition had really fallen apart. Placing conservatism in this perspective will better capture the divisions, divides, and alliances, which have been a prominent part of the country's political past but have often been lost in descriptions of a neatly defined, linear, two-party tradition.

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