

# American Political Culture

## Classical Conservatism

### Political Ideologies

A political ideology is a system of beliefs and values that sets forth the conditions for a government's legitimacy. A political ideology purports to explain what government should do, and why. Within more developed nation-states, the following three ideologies competed with each other for influence in the 18th through 20th centuries:

1. Classical conservatism
2. Classical liberalism
3. Socialism

Of these three, only classical liberalism has played a dominant role in American political culture and best explains the nature of our formal institutions of government.

### Origins of Classical Conservatism

Classical conservatism has been the default political ideology over the span of human history, though it has taken many forms including aristocracy, monarchy, military dictatorships, and theocracies. It finds the liberal idea that "all men are created equal" as patently ridiculous and contrary to the evidence. There is a natural social order that all people belong to and that societies should not attempt to disrupt. There are the few who are fit to govern and the many who are not. Classical conservatism is thus unapologetically elitist. To challenge the established social and political order is to risk catastrophe as seen in the decades of chaos and bloodshed that the French Revolution inaugurated. Its view of society is organic. A useful metaphor is that of the human body with various segments of society fulfilling different but important roles—the King the head, the Church the heart/chest, knights the stomach and peasants the feet.

Although classical conservatism is hostile to those who seek to leave their rightful place in society, it does hold that the state has a responsibility to take care of its weakest members. In feudal times this principle was captured by the idea of noblesse oblige. Because society is an organic whole, classical conservatism sees religion and government as inseparable. Religion

should be uniform to prevent social fragmentation and the state and church should reinforce each other. As for the economy, classical conservatism's privileging of societal interests over individual ambitions lends itself to a paternalistic or statist orientation with regard to economic management.

## **Influences of Classical Conservatism**

While modern democracies generally reject the idea of hereditary privilege and embrace the legal and political equality of their citizens, the residual impact of classical conservatism is still evident in most institutions and culture. Europe's feudal and aristocratic heritage is apparent in the persistence of constitutional monarchies found in Great Britain, Spain and Scandinavian countries where hereditary kings and queens play a largely symbolic role, supported by taxpayer's money. Britain still boasts a much-diminished but very visible House of Lords, traditionally the legislative chamber of those with land and titles. In contrast with the United States, several countries still have a state church (the Church of England, the Church of Denmark) while others permit greater display of religious symbols in schools and public places such as crucifixes on classroom walls in traditionally Catholic Bavaria. In many countries, such as Italy and Germany, Christian Democratic parties rooted in older Catholic social movements play a prominent role in electoral politics.

Even in countries such as France and India, both heavily influenced by Socialist ideology, social distinctions rooted in feudal pasts continue to mark social life. In France those with aristocratic names enjoy an advantage in certain social, professional, and political circles, while in India the harsh caste system, though officially abolished, throws up formidable barriers to social and political upward mobility. Other residual traces of classical conservatism, however, are more benign. Its emphasis on the social obligations of those who rule to the less fortunate means that even conservative parties in most countries are considerably more likely to support many features of the welfare state than their conservative counterparts in the American Republican Party or even many American Democrats. Classical conservatism's legacy and socialism thus mutually reinforce the societal consensus on the welfare state in countries where their influence is strong.

## **Activity: Check Your Understanding**

Covers classical conservatism. Classical conservatism asserts that people belong to a natural social order and societies should not attempt to disrupt it. It contends that only a few are fit to govern and many are not. Likewise, classical conservatism maintains that the state has the responsibility to take care of its weakest members (the idea of “noblesse oblige”). Mentions that constitutional monarchies reflect the influences of classical conservatism.

## **Additional Resources**

### **Websites**

#### **[Church of England](http://www.churchofengland.org/)**

<http://www.churchofengland.org/>

The website for Britain’s state church includes a history and a “Views” section that states the Church’s policies on such issues as education, health care, international affairs, and the environment.

#### **[Christian Democratic Party](http://www.cdp.org.au/nsw.html)**

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The website for this Australian political party has information on policies and candidates.