

Conservatism in Theory and Practice

Freshman Seminar—Fall 2024

PSCI 0010-302

MW 3:30-5pm

Prof. Linker

Course Description

In this freshman seminar, we will examine the history of conservative ideas from their origin in the wake of the French Revolution on down to the American present. We will also take note of how these ideas have been implemented in practice when their champions have gained and held political power.

The class will be divided into four thematic/historical blocks:

1. 18th-Century Origins
2. The Old Right
3. The New Right
4. The Populist Right

In the first block, we will read and discuss the ideas of Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre. The first is widely considered the father of conservatism, while the second inspired the harder-edged reactionary tradition. In our reading and discussion of these thinkers, we will do our best to determine how similar or different they are in terms of both ideology and temperament.

Next, we will turn to the “Old Right” that influenced American politics during the early decades of the 20th century, doing our best to distill its core moral commitments and policy goals.

From there we will turn to the “New Right” that formed around the magazine *National Review* during the 1950s and '60s and ultimately came to power with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. We will pay close attention to the ideology of this “conservative movement,” taking note of continuities and discontinuities with earlier forms of conservative and reactionary thought, as well as gauging its practical influence on the country and the Republican Party.

In the final weeks of the semester, we will turn to the rise of the populist right, taking note of its origins in the early 1990s, its resurgence in the Tea Party movement of the late 2000s and early 2010s, and its takeover of the Republican Party in 2016. Here we will pose a series of questions, including: How does the populist right differ from Reaganite conservatism? Is the populist right conservative or reactionary? Both or neither? To what extent should it be understood as a revival of earlier forms of right-wing politics? Or is it a wholly new development?

Readings

The class meets twice a week. Students will be expected to complete 20-25 pages of reading for each class session. While I may order a book or two for purchase, most of the readings will be freely available on Canvas in the form of PDFs.

Grading Policies

This class is a seminar. That means students are expected to come to class prepared to discuss the readings with their peers and the professor. A substantial portion of the course grade (20 percent) will be based on student participation in these discussions. Each student will also write two short (approx. 1,000-word) essays responding to the readings (15 percent for each essay). The remainder of the course grade will be determined by an in-class midterm (20 percent) and a final exam (30 percent) administered during exam week.