

Are Today's Conservatives Actually 'Conservative'?

It is common in political discourse these days to pit “conservatives” against “liberals.” The former ideological group, we are told by the media, are [in crisis](#), while the latter group is in the ascendant in American culture and politics. And [self-designated conservatives](#) have repeatedly let us know that presumptive Republican nominee Donald Trump is *not* a conservative.

Yet, even though the public frequently throws around these terms, few ever sit back and reflect upon what principles define a conservative or a liberal.

In [1982](#), prolific author Russell Kirk took a stab at defining conservatism, offering the following six principles as “best discerned in the theoretical and practical politics of British and American conservatives”:

1) Transcendent Order

“First, conservatives generally believe that there exists a transcendent moral order, to which we ought to try to conform the ways of society. A divine tactic, however dimly descried, is at work in human society.”

2) Social Continuity

“They prefer the devil they know to the devil they don't know. Order and justice and freedom, they believe, are the artificial products of a long and painful social experience, the results of centuries of trial and reflection and sacrifice... [N]ecessary change, they argue, ought to be gradual and discriminatory, never ‘unfixing old interests at once.’”

3) Prescription

“Conservatives sense that modern men and women are dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, able to see farther than their ancestors only because of the great stature of those who have preceded us in time. Therefore conservatives very frequently emphasize the importance of “prescription”—that is, of things established by immemorial usage, so ‘that the mind of man runneth not to the contrary.’”

4) Prudence

“Any public measure ought to be judged by its probable long-run consequences, not merely by temporary advantage or popularity. Liberals and radicals, the conservative holds, are imprudent: for they dash at their objectives without giving much heed to the risk of new abuses worse than the evils they hope to sweep away. Human society being complex, remedies cannot be simple if they are to be effective.”

5) Variety

“They feel affection for the proliferating intricacy of long-established social institutions and modes of life, as distinguished from the narrowing uniformity and deadening egalitarianism of radical systems. For the preservation of a healthy diversity in any civilization, there must survive orders and classes, differences in material condition, and many sorts of inequality. The only true forms of equality are equality in the Last Judgment and equality before a just court of law; all other attempts at leveling lead, at best, to social stagnation.”

6) Imperfection

“Man being imperfect, no perfect social order ever can be created. Because of human restlessness, mankind would grow rebellious under any utopian domination, and would break out once more in violent discontent—or else expire of boredom. To aim for utopia is to end in disaster, the conservative says: we are not made for perfect things. All that we reasonably can expect is a tolerably ordered, just, and free society, in which some evils, maladjustments, and suffering continue to lurk.”

Do you think these principles accurately capture the essence of “conservatism”? If so, has the failure to adhere to them perhaps led to the so-called “crisis” of conservatism in America today?

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