

# Encyclopedia of Politics of the American West

## Conservatism

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Contemporary political conservatism in the American West dates from dissatisfaction with the modern Republicanism of the Eisenhower administration, which many conservatives felt was excessively accommodating to Democratic New Deal–era policy beliefs.

## Barry Goldwater

Contemporary conservatism's emergence began in the early 1960s with the rise to national prominence of Sen. Barry Goldwater, R-Ariz. He became a leading exponent of the discontent with Eisenhower's style of Republicanism and articulated it in his book, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (1960).

Conservative organizations, such as Young Americans for Freedom, were founded during this period and helped to stimulate increased conservative political activism. This culminated in Goldwater's receiving the 1964 Republican presidential nomination. Although he would lose a landslide election to Lyndon Johnson that year, Goldwater's success ensured that conservatives would eventually become preeminent in the Republican Party's coalition of fiscal, social, and national security–policy conservatives.

Goldwater continued to expound his version of conservatism during his Senate career, which lasted into 1986. His positions included fiscal and national security conservatism but also a more libertarian stance on social issues, which has remained influential in some segments of western conservatism. The conservative presence in the West became influential in areas such as Orange County, California; Colorado Springs, Colorado; suburban Phoenix; Houston and Dallas, Texas; and other areas of the Mountain West. This would be reflected in the election of conservatives to federal, state, and local governmental offices in those regions.

# The Religious Right

Concern over growing governmental power, social upheavals during the 1960s, and controversy over the Vietnam War also prompted conservative displeasure, increasing the activism of western and other U.S. conservatives. Protestant evangelical churches, such as the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, saw their members become increasingly vocal in the political process. They expressed their opposition to abortion rights after the [p. 261 ↓ ] 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113, legalized most abortion. They also expressed their concern over the increasing visibility of nontraditional sexual practices such as homosexuality and pornography; over the increasing role of the federal government in economic activity; and over the American position in the world, with particular emphasis on the U.S. relationship with the Soviet Union.

## Ronald Reagan

Ronald Reagan was a charismatic and eloquent figure who was able to tap into this conservative discontent and appeal to a wide range of individuals across the American political spectrum. His 1966 California gubernatorial victory and subsequent 1970 reelection gave conservatism a political face and personality that would soon achieve national recognition. Reagan would narrowly miss winning the 1976 Republican presidential primary but was elected and reelected to the presidency with landslide victories in 1980 and 1984. He ranks as one of America's most historically significant presidents due to the domestic and international events of his presidency.

Reagan won the presidency using his effective communications skills, offering credible and substantive policy alternatives to incumbent President Jimmy Carter's mismanagement of domestic economic and foreign policy matters such as the Iranian hostage crisis. He was also able to leverage the public's belief in declining U.S. military power in relationship to the Soviet Union into support for greatly increased military spending. Reagan successfully tapped into western anger such as the Sagebrush Rebellion, a dispute between western loggers, miners, and ranchers on the one hand

and federal agency officials from agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management on the other. The dispute was over proper use and development of western natural resources on the extensive array of federal government–owned western lands.

## The Post-Reagan Era

Between 1964 and 2008, the Republican presidential nominee was from a western state in every election year except 1976. Conservative Republicans held many influential positions in Congress, including chairs of committees affecting western economic interests such as those dealing with energy, natural resources, and Indian affairs.

They also led a variety of cabinet-level departments, including the Departments of Agriculture and Interior, which had major impact on western economic development. Conservatives also influenced state government policymaking, as evidenced by California's 1978 passage of Proposition 13, which limited property tax increases.

Western conservatives' attitudes toward the Republican Party would ebb and flow during the post-Reagan era. Some western conservatives became dissatisfied with Republican president George H. W. Bush and supported Pat Buchanan's 1992 primary challenge. California, which was a leader in the emergence of conservatism as a major force in twentieth-century American politics, is now a predominately liberal, Democratic state, whereas Texas has become the most powerful conservative state in the Republican electoral coalition.

Western conservatives have developed a number of public-policy research institutions to promote conservative or libertarian economic policies, social policies, and foreign and national security policies. These include the Claremont Institute (Claremont, Calif.); the Goldwater Institute (Phoenix, Ariz.); the Hoover Institution (Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif.); the Independent Institute (Oakland, Calif.); the Reason Foundation (Los Angeles, Calif.); and the Texas Public Policy Foundation (Austin, Texas). Sources of funding for western, conservative political aspirations include the Charles G. Koch Foundation (Wichita, Kans.); the Sarah Scaife Foundation (Pittsburgh, Pa.); and the Wilbur Foundation (Santa Barbara, Calif.). Numerous conservative political action committees or interest advocacy groups are also based in the West, including the

Alliance Defense Fund (Scottsdale, Ariz.); Focus on the Family (Colorado Springs, Colo.); Our Country Deserves Better (Sacramento, Calif.); and the Traditional Values Coalition (Anaheim, Calif., and Washington, D.C.).

George H. W. Bush's defeat by Bill Clinton in 1992 was a momentary rebuff for western conservatives, who, along with their counterparts in other areas of the country, expressed their opposition to Clinton's policies. These included Clinton's 1993 budget, which did not receive a single Republican vote; Clinton's proposed health care reforms; and the Clinton administration's attempts to allow open military service by homosexuals. Clinton's 1996 designation of Utah's Grand Staircase–Escalante area as a national monument under the Antiquities Act aroused intense opposition from western conservatives in Utah and [p. 262 ↓ ] elsewhere due to their belief that this area possessed significant, undeveloped mineral resources.

Controversies over Clinton's policies resulted in Republicans gaining control of both the House and Senate in 1994. Western conservatives also fought Clinton administration environmental policies. One such policy sought to reintroduce gray wolves into Yellowstone National Park. Another Clinton administration policy was the National Forest Service's Roadless Area program, which was designed to protect sensitive plants, habitats, and species but was opposed by the mining and lumber industries, local governments, and off-road vehicle users.

The 2000 election of Republican George W. Bush as president seemed to herald improved relations with western conservatives, as Bush's inner circle included conservatives such as Vice President Dick Cheney from Wyoming; Gail Norton from Colorado; and Dirk Kempthorne, who was from Idaho and served as secretary of the interior during both of Bush's terms. Regional issues of concern to the West, such as access to natural resources and property rights, were overshadowed by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and U.S. involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in response to these attacks.

The George W. Bush administration saw increased interest in attempts to access natural resources in the West, including natural gas, oil reserves in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and North Dakota and Montana's Bakken Shale formation, which most western conservatives favored exploiting as a means of reducing U.S.

dependence on foreign energy sources. Western conservatives also became concerned about rising U.S. budget deficits and an increasing national debt, both of which were due to protracted military conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan; the increasing costs of the Medicare Prescription Drug Program and other federal entitlement programs; and controversy over how climate change could affect western states' access to water, transportation, economic growth, and overall financial prosperity. These issues would increase national conservative discontent with Bush.

Western states and conservative political fortunes were also hit hard by the financial crisis that began in late 2008. In particular, the subprime mortgage market collapse took a heavy toll on states such as Arizona, California, and Nevada due to drastic residential foreclosure increases. These economic and social problems and discontent with Bush led to the 2008 election of Illinois Democrat Barack Obama as president and the election of strong Democratic majorities in the House and Senate. The victorious Democrats then proceeded to enact significant financial regulatory and health care legislation in 2009 and 2010.

Enactment of the health care legislation and concern over the costs of the Obama administration's economic stimulus program resurrected western conservatives' fighting spirit. This was most vividly personified in the emergence of the decentralized Tea Party movement, whose members were populist conservatives who vocally opposed what they saw as the Obama administration's infringements on individual economic freedom and its failure to reduce the national debt. This movement produced a number of congressional candidates during the 2010 election cycle, but its record that year was mixed. For example, the Tea Party movement helped elect Mike Lee to the U.S. Senate from Utah, but Tea Party–supported candidate Sharron Angle lost to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada. While Tea Party–backed candidate Joe Miller defeated incumbent senator Lisa Murkowski in the Republican primary in Alaska, she retained her Senate seat by running a write-in campaign against him and winning the general election. However, the Tea Party did play a critical role in helping the Republican Party regain control of the House of Representatives in 2010, increase the number of Republican-held U.S. Senate seats, and increase the number of Republican governors and state legislators around the country. The Tea Party movement's influence and enduring impact on western conservatism remain a work in process.

# Ideology

Western conservatism is a movement with a number of intellectual and social strands. These include libertarians such as former New Mexico governor Gary Johnson, who supports drug legalization; evangelical Christians who play major roles in promoting traditional marriage against proponents of same-sex marriage; traditional conservatives such as Arizona senator Jon Kyl, who seek to promote substantive policymaking and principles in the federal government; Arizona governor Jan Brewer, who has signed controversial illegal immigration law enforcement legislation; emerging Hispanic leaders such as Nevada and New Mexico governors Brian Sandoval and Susana Martinez; and recently elected Tea Party–supported officials such as Rep. Trent Franks, R-Ariz., Rep. Gary Miller, R-Calif., and Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah.

These divergent strands of western conservatives will need to reconcile differences among economic, social, and [p. 263 ↓ ] foreign policy/national security conservatives in the years to come if they are to be a united political force. They will have to work on policies to promote western economic growth without compromising environmental quality, and they will have to find ways of appealing to Hispanics and Asian Americans, whose demographic influence continues to grow in western states. Once in power, they will have to provide transparent and high-quality delivery of government services while balancing budgets, keeping tax rates affordable, and maintaining policies that will attract and retain high-paying jobs in various communities while not neglecting the critically important agricultural sector. Conflicts with the Obama administration over health care and immigration enforcement may also see conservative policy makers in the West use the U.S. Constitution's Tenth Amendment, which gives states powers that the Constitution does not grant to the federal government or ban from the states, to enact and implement policies they see as more beneficial and less injurious to their states than current federal policies are.

Recent history demonstrates that western conservatives have been able to adapt to changing economic, political, and social trends to play a crucial role in national political and governmental developments. Despite the diversity of opinions in western conservatism, its emphasis on individual self-reliance, intellectual maturity, and reaffirmation of personal liberty give this branch of conservatism a particular importance

in the overall development and evolution of American conservative political thought. As the center of American population continues moving west and southwest, the intellectual influence of western conservatism will continue impacting American politics and governmental policymaking in all areas of the country, as well as internationally, due to its emphasis on expanding liberty and personal and psychological frontiers.

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See also

#### Further Readings

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