

# A Conservative Movement Emerges

## MAIN IDEA

Conservatism reached a high point with the election in 1980 of President Ronald Reagan and Vice-President George Bush.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

In the early 21st century, conservative views strongly influenced both major political parties.

## Terms & Names

- entitlement program
- New Right
- affirmative action
- reverse discrimination
- conservative coalition
- Moral Majority
- Ronald Reagan

## One American's Story

Peggy Noonan grew up with a strong sense of social and political justice. As a child, she idolized the liberal Kennedys; as a teenager, she devoured articles on social and political issues. After college, Noonan went to work for CBS.

Over the years, Noonan's political views became increasingly conservative. She eventually won a job as a speechwriter for Ronald Reagan, whose commitment to his conservative values moved her deeply. Noonan recalled that her response to Reagan was not unusual.

### A PERSONAL VOICE PEGGY NOONAN

“The young people who came to Washington for the Reagan revolution came to make things better. . . . They looked at where freedom was and . . . where freedom wasn't and what that did, and they wanted to help the guerrilla fighters who were trying to overthrow the Communist regimes that had been imposed on them. . . . The thing the young conservatives were always talking about, . . . was freedom, freedom:

*we'll free up more of your money,  
we'll free up more of the world,  
freedom freedom freedom—*

It was the drumbeat that held a disparate group together, the rhythm that kept a fractious, not-made-in-heaven alliance in one piece.”

—*What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era*



Peggy Noonan

Like millions of other Reagan supporters, Noonan agreed with the slogan that was the heart of Reagan's political creed: “Government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem.”

## The Conservative Movement Builds

Ever since Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona had run for president in 1964, conservatives had argued that state governments, businesses, and individuals needed more freedom from the heavy hand of Washington, D.C. By 1980, government



spending on **entitlement programs**—programs that provide guaranteed benefits to particular groups—was nearly \$300 billion annually. The costs together with stories of fraudulently-obtained benefits caused resentment among many taxpayers.

In addition, some people had become frustrated with the government's civil rights policies. Congress had passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in an effort to eliminate racial discrimination. Over the years, however, judicial decisions and government regulations had broadened the reach of the act. A growing number of Americans viewed with skepticism what had begun as a movement toward equal opportunity. Although many people had rejected separate schools for blacks and whites as unfair and unequal, few wanted to bus their children long distances to achieve a fixed ratio of black and white students.

**THE NEW RIGHT** As the 1970s progressed, right-wing grass-roots groups across the country emerged to support and promote single issues that reflected their key interests. These people became known as the **New Right**. The New Right focused its energy on controversial social issues, such as opposing abortion, blocking the Equal Rights Amendment, and evading court-ordered busing. It also called for a return to school prayer, which had been outlawed by the Supreme Court in 1962.

Many in the New Right criticized the policy of **affirmative action**. Affirmative action required employers and educational institutions to give special consideration to women, African Americans, and other minority groups, even though these people were not necessarily better qualified. Many conservatives saw affirmative action as a form of **reverse discrimination**, favoring one group over another on the basis of race or gender. To members of the New Right, liberal positions on affirmative action and other issues represented an assault on traditional values. **A**

**THE CONSERVATIVE COALITION** Beginning in the mid-1960s, the conservative movement in the United States grew in strength. Eventually conservative groups formed the **conservative coalition**—an alliance of business leaders, middle-class voters, disaffected Democrats, and fundamentalist Christian groups.

Conservative intellectuals argued the cause of the conservative coalition in newspapers such as *The Wall Street Journal* and magazines such as the *National Review*, founded in 1955 by conservative William F. Buckley, Jr. Conservative think tanks, such as the American Enterprise Institute and The Heritage Foundation, were founded to develop conservative policies and principles that would appeal to the majority of voters.

**THE MORAL MAJORITY** Religion, especially evangelical Christianity, played a key role in the growing strength of the conservative coalition. The 1970s had brought a huge religious revival, especially among fundamentalist sects. Each week, millions of Americans watched evangelist preachers on television or listened to them on the radio. Two of the most influential televangelists were Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. Falwell formed an organization called the **Moral Majority**. The Moral Majority consisted mostly of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians who interpreted



▲ Several high school students in New York hold a prayer meeting in 1973.

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Issues

**A** What was the agenda of the New Right?

#### Goals of the Conservative Movement

- Shrink the size of the federal government and reduce spending
- Promote family values and patriotic ideals
- Stimulate business by reducing government regulations and lowering taxes
- Strengthen the national defense



the Bible literally and believed in absolute standards of right and wrong. They condemned liberal attitudes and behaviors and argued for a restoration of traditional moral values. They worked toward their political goals by using direct-mail campaigns and by raising money to support candidates. Jerry Falwell became the spokesperson for the Moral Majority. **B**

### **A PERSONAL VOICE** REVEREND JERRY FALWELL

**“Our nation’s internal problems are the direct result of her spiritual condition. . . . Right living must be reestablished as an American way of life. . . . Now is the time to begin calling America back to God, back to the Bible, back to morality.”**

As individual conservative groups formed networks, they created a movement dedicated to bringing back what they saw as traditional “family values.” They hoped their ideas would help to reduce the nation’s high divorce rate, lower the number of out-of-wedlock births, encourage individual responsibility, and generally revive bygone prosperity and patriotic times.

#### **MAIN IDEA**

#### **Summarizing**

**B** What were the main concerns of the Moral Majority?

KEY PLAYER



RONALD REAGAN  
1911–

Ronald Wilson Reagan was born in 1911 in Tampico, Illinois. He grew up in Dixon, Illinois, graduated from nearby Eureka College, and then worked as a sports announcer in Iowa. In 1937, Reagan moved to Hollywood and became a movie actor, eventually making more than 50 films. As president of the Screen Actors Guild, he worked actively to remove alleged Communist influences from the movie industry.

Reagan had the ability to express his ideas in simple and clear language that the average voter could understand. When he proposed a 10 percent cut in government spending on social programs, he stated, “We can lecture our children about extravagance until we run out of voice and breath. Or we can cure their extravagance by simply reducing their allowance.”

## Conservatives Win Political Power

In 1976, **Ronald Reagan** lost the Republican nomination to the incumbent, Gerald Ford, in a very closely contested race. Four years later in a series of hard-fought primaries, Reagan won the 1980 nomination and chose George H. W. Bush as his running mate. Reagan and Bush ran against the incumbent president and vice-president, Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale, who were nominated again by the Democrats despite their low standing in the polls.

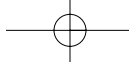
**REAGAN’S QUALIFICATIONS** Originally a New Deal Democrat, Ronald Reagan had become a conservative Republican during the 1950s. He claimed that he had not left the Democratic Party but rather that the party had left him. As a spokesman for General Electric, he toured the country making speeches in favor of free enterprise and against big government. In 1964, he campaigned hard for Barry Goldwater, the Republican candidate for president. His speech nominating Goldwater at the 1964 Republican convention made Reagan a serious candidate for public office. In 1966, Reagan was elected governor of California, and in 1970, he was reelected.

**THE 1980 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION** In 1980, Reagan ran on a number of key issues. Supreme Court decisions on abortion, pornography, the teaching of evolution, and prayer in public schools all concerned conservative voters, and they rallied to Reagan. The prolonged Iranian hostage crisis and the weak economy under Carter, particularly the high rate of inflation, also helped Reagan.

Thanks in part to his acting career and his long experience in the public eye, Reagan was an extremely effective candidate. In contrast to Carter, who often seemed stiff and nervous, Reagan was relaxed, charming, and affable. He loved making quips: “A recession is when your neighbor loses his job. A depression is when you lose yours. And recovery is

#### **Background**

See *free enterprise* on page R41 in the Economics Handbook.



when Jimmy Carter loses his.” Reagan’s long-standing skill at simplifying issues and presenting clear-cut answers led his supporters to call him the Great Communicator. Also, his commitment to military and economic strength appealed to many Americans.

Only 52.6 percent of American voters went to the polls in 1980. Reagan won the election by a narrow majority; he got 44 million votes, or 51 percent of the total. His support, however, was spread throughout the country, so that he carried 44 states and won 489 electoral votes. Republicans also gained control of the Senate for the first time since 1954. As Reagan assumed the presidency, many people were buoyed by his genial smile and his assertion that it was “morning again in America.”

Now, conservatives had elected one of their own—a true believer in less government, lower taxes, and traditional values. Once elected, Reagan worked to translate the conservative agenda into public policy.

**MAIN IDEA**

**Analyzing Causes**

**C** What factors led to Reagan’s victory in 1980?

### Presidential Election of 1980

Party	Candidate	Electoral Votes	Popular Votes
<span style="color: green;">■</span> Republican	Ronald Reagan	489	43,904,153
<span style="color: orange;">■</span> Democratic	Jimmy Carter	49	35,483,883
Independent	John Anderson		5,720,060

Not shown:  
■ 3 Alaska  
■ 4 Hawaii  
■ 3 District of Columbia

**GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER**

- Location** Which states and/or district voted for Jimmy Carter in 1980?
- Region** Which region of the country—North, South, East, or West—voted exclusively for Ronald Reagan?

**SECTION 1 ASSESSMENT**

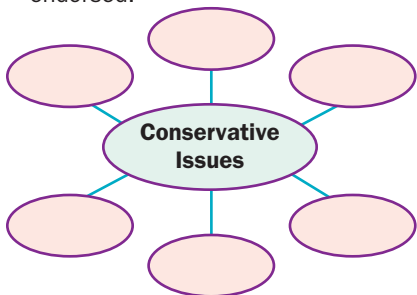
**1. TERMS & NAMES** For each term or name below, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- entitlement program
- affirmative action
- conservative coalition
- Ronald Reagan
- New Right
- reverse discrimination
- Moral Majority

**MAIN IDEA**

**2. TAKING NOTES**

Use a cluster diagram to record the issues that conservatives strongly endorsed.



Choose one issue and explain in a paragraph the conservative position on that issue.

**CRITICAL THINKING**

**3. ANALYZING MOTIVES**

How did the leaders of the conservative movement of the 1980s want to change government?

**Think About:**

- the difference between the conservative view of government and the liberal view
- the groups that made up the conservative coalition
- conservatives’ attitudes toward existing government programs

**4. ANALYZING EFFECTS**

What role did the Moral Majority play in the conservative movement of the 1970s and early 1980s?

**5. EVALUATING LEADERSHIP**

What personal qualities in Ronald Reagan helped him to win election as president in 1980?