

The Conservative Mind

DAVID BROOKS Published: September 24, 2012 New York Times

When I joined the staff of National Review as a lowly associate in 1984, the magazine, and the conservative movement itself, was a fusion of two different mentalities.

On the one side, there were the economic conservatives. These were people that anybody following contemporary Republican politics would be familiar with. They spent a lot of time worrying about the way government intrudes upon economic liberty. They upheld freedom as their highest political value. They admired risk-takers. They worried that excessive government would create a sclerotic nation with a dependent populace.

But there was another sort of conservative, who would be less familiar now. This was the traditional conservative, intellectual heir to Edmund Burke, Russell Kirk, Clinton Rossiter and Catholic social teaching. This sort of conservative didn't see society as a battleground between government and the private sector. Instead, the traditionalist wanted to preserve a society that functioned as a harmonious ecosystem, in which the different layers were nestled upon each other: individual, family, company, neighborhood, religion, city government and national government.

Because they were conservative, they tended to believe that power should be devolved down to the lower levels of this chain. They believed that people should lead disciplined, orderly lives, but doubted that individuals have the ability to do this alone, unaided by social custom and by God. So they were intensely interested in creating the sort of social, economic and political order that would encourage people to work hard, finish school and postpone childbearing until marriage.

Recently [the blogger Rod Dreher linked to Kirk's essay](#), "Ten Conservative Principles," which gives the flavor of this brand of traditional conservatism. This kind of conservative cherishes custom, believing that the individual is foolish but the species is wise. It is usually best to be guided by precedent.

This conservative believes in prudence on the grounds that society is complicated and it's generally best to reform it steadily but cautiously. Providence moves slowly but the devil hurries.

The two conservative tendencies lived in tension. But together they embodied a truth that was put into words by the child psychologist John Bowlby, that life is best organized as a series of daring ventures from a secure base.

The economic conservatives were in charge of the daring ventures that produced economic growth. The traditionalists were in charge of establishing the secure base — a society in which families are intact, self-discipline is the rule, children are secure and government provides a subtle hand.

Ronald Reagan embodied both sides of this fusion, and George W. Bush tried to recreate it with his compassionate conservatism. But that effort was doomed because in the ensuing years, conservatism changed.

In the polarized political conflict with liberalism, shrinking government has become the organizing conservative principle. Economic conservatives have the money and the institutions. They have taken control. Traditional conservatism has gone into eclipse. These days, speakers at Republican gatherings almost always use the language of market conservatism — getting government off our backs, enhancing economic freedom. Even Mitt Romney, who subscribes to a faith that knows a lot about social capital, relies exclusively on the language of market conservatism.

It's not so much that today's Republican politicians reject traditional, one-nation conservatism. They don't even know it exists. There are few people on the conservative side who'd be willing to raise taxes on the affluent to fund mobility programs for the working class. There are very few willing to use government to actively intervene in chaotic neighborhoods, even when 40 percent of American kids are born out of wedlock. There are very few Republicans who protest against a House Republican budget proposal that cuts domestic discretionary spending to absurdly low levels.

The results have been unfortunate. Since they no longer speak in the language of social order, Republicans have very little to offer the less educated half of this country. Republicans have very little to say to Hispanic voters, who often come from cultures that place high value on communal solidarity.

Republicans repeat formulas — government support equals dependency — that make sense according to free-market ideology, but oversimplify the real world. Republicans like Romney often rely on an economic language that seems corporate and alien to people who do not define themselves in economic terms. No wonder Romney has trouble relating.

Some people blame bad campaign managers for Romney's underperforming campaign, but the problem is deeper. Conservatism has lost the balance between economic and traditional conservatism. The Republican Party has abandoned half of its intellectual ammunition. It appeals to people as potential business owners, but not as parents, neighbors and citizens.