Multimedia Primary Source Discussion Set
The Roots of the “Reagan Revolution”

URL: https://americanarchive.org/primary_source_sets/conservatism

Teaching Tips
The first two sources in this set document the state of conservatism in the early to mid-1960s, a time when the Democratic Party seemed dominant and the conservative movement seemed to be a marginal political force. However, the social upheaval of the late 1960s and early 1970s provided opportunities for the Republican Party to chip away at the elements of the New Deal Coalition. Many of the sources in this set help illuminate the forces that led many white blue-collar voters to gravitate towards candidates like Richard Nixon and George Wallace. The rest of the sources in this set focus on the mid- to late 1970s, showing how conservative politicians in this era capitalized on fears and frustrations about crime, economic stagflation, taxes, welfare, abortion, and changing norms around sex and sexuality. Collectively, the sources help explain how Republican Ronald Reagan was able to achieve dominant electoral college victories in 1980 and 1984.

Background Information
Before engaging with this resource set, students should be familiar with the following:
- The activist movements of the “New Left” in the late 1960s and early 1970s
- The post-1960s changes in social behavior regarding gender, sex, and sexuality
- The economic challenges and transformations of the 1970s, including stagflation, deindustrialization, and urban decay
- The foreign policy challenges of the Carter Presidency

Essential Question
What role should the government play in American social and economic life?
General Discussion Questions

- To what extent was the rise of conservatism a backlash against the New Left activism of the 1960s?
- In what ways could right-wing politicians cite social developments of the 1960s and 1970s as evidence that the liberal visions of government and morality had “failed”?
- Why did a growing number of Americans turn away from the Democratic Party and towards the Republicans during the 1960s and 1970s?
- What historical factors help explain the electoral success of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984?
- In what ways did conservatives want a smaller role for government? In what ways did they want a bigger role for government? Do you see a contradiction between these views of government, or can they be reconciled?

Classroom Activities

1) Topic: Political coalitions

When historians and political scientists discuss “political coalitions,” they are referring to multiple blocs of voters who tend to form alliances in support of a particular candidate or party. The “New Deal Coalition” that voted for Democrats starting in the 1930s is traditionally understood to have been composed of southern whites, urban members of ethnic and racial minority groups, and union members. With that in mind, ask students to watch the following sources:

- A Liberal Argues That Disruptive Protests Play Into Nixon’s Hands (1971)
- George Wallace Criticizes Busing and Open Housing Laws (1968)
- Race and the Urban/Suburban Divide in Detroit (1968)
- Party Realignment and the Breakdown of the New Deal Coalition (1972)

Ask students questions like:
- What was it about the left-wing activism of the 1960s that might have disrupted the New Deal Coalition, leading some Americans who had traditionally voted for Democrats to support other candidates?
- What arguments and strategies could politicians like Richard Nixon and George Wallace use to attract these “New Deal Democrats”?
- In particular, there was a big shift among union members between the Presidential elections of 1964 and 1972. While an estimated 73% of voters from union households voted for Democrat Lyndon Johnson in 1964, Republican Richard Nixon won the union vote 54%-46% in 1972. Why might union members have shifted towards the Republican Party during the 1972 election?
2) Topic: Conservative visions

Have students watch the following clips:

- Gerald Ford Gets Tough on Crime (1976)
- The Backlash Against Gay Rights in Florida (1977)
- Jerry Falwell Describes the Goals of the “Moral Majority” (1980)

Ask students:

- Why might the economic problems of the 1970s have played to the advantage of politicians advancing conservative ideas? What arguments could they make about how the “liberal” vision of government had failed?
- What were some changes in American society and politics that evangelical conservative political leaders criticized? What arguments did they make for why these changes were a threat to traditional Christian morality?
- How did Ronald Reagan depict America’s role on the world stage? Why might this message have been especially appealing in the context of the foreign policy challenges of the Carter Presidency?
- In what ways did conservatives want a smaller role for government? In what ways did they want a bigger role for government? Do you see a contradiction between these views of government, or can they be reconciled?

3) Discussion: Issues and policies

After students have watched some or all of the clips in the set, you could lead students in discussions about what they believe about political issues explored in these sources. Questions could include:

- Conservatives criticized the government regulations, welfare programs, and higher levels of taxation created by Democrats in the mid-20th century. What evidence is there to support or refute conservative arguments that these policies hurt economic growth, unfairly burden taxpayers, and hinder freedom?
- During the late 1960s, some New Left activists engaged in disruptive, controversial, and occasionally violent forms of protest. Are these tactics appropriate ways to respond to injustice? Are they politically effective? Do you think it is fair that some moderate Democrats blamed these tactics for Nixon’s political success?

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Jerry Falwell, evangelical conservative leader of the Moral Majority, wrote that the “Christian public” needed to get involved in politics to create a “climate of morality” in America. What role, if any, do you think people’s religious beliefs should play in shaping government policy?

Faced with a rise in crime, many conservative politicians argued that liberal social policies supposedly aimed at addressing the root causes of poverty had failed. Instead, they contended, “tough” policies focused on policing, prosecution, and punishment were the answer. While there was a bipartisan shift towards more punitive criminal justice policies in this era, the “tough on crime” movement was especially strong on the political right. What do you think was the right approach to tackling the rising crime rates of the era? What criminal justice policies do you support today?

4) Discussion: Comparing the Reagan-era Republican Party to the Republican Party of the 2010s

After students have watched some or all of the clips in the set, you could lead a discussion comparing the Reagan-era Republican Party to the Republican Party of the 2010s. Many political commentators argue that the candidacy and election of Donald Trump in 2016 marked a significant shift in the direction of the Republican Party, but there were also significant continuities between the two periods. Here are some discussion questions that you could use to assess the similarities and differences between these two eras in right-wing politics:

- In this set, you learned about various issues that excited and mobilized Republican voters in the 1960s and 1970s. Did the same kinds of issues seem to inspire the passions of Republican voters in the 2010s? Or do you think that the Republican Party of that era became focused on a different set of issues?
- Undoubtedly, Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump were two significant figures in the history of the Republican Party. What were similarities and differences between the political beliefs of Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump? What similarities and differences do you see between the personal background and public “persona” of the two men?
- Do you think the Republican Party of the 2010s was more or less conservative than the Republican Party of the 1980s? (One’s answer to this question will depend upon the definition of “conservative,” so you can use the discussion to tease out the defining elements of conservatism.)