

# *An Important Dimension of the American Founding Spirit: Conservatism*

**Kexin Yang**

*Tongji University, Shanghai, China*  
*kosn86@163.com*

**Keywords:** Conservatism; Political Order; Early American Politics

**Abstract:** The term "American liberal tradition" has long been popular in mainstream political science regarding the American founding spirit. But with the rise of the conservative movement in the 19th century, conservative scholars sought to incorporate the "conservative tradition" into the American spirit. By clarifying the interaction between conservatism and early American political practice, this paper explores the important role of American conservatism in the three founding moments of the American political order: the colonial period, the American Revolution, and the Constitutional Convention, and clarifies that American conservatism was an important dimension of the American founding spirit that could not be ignored.

## **1. Introduction**

With regard to the discussion of the American founding spirit, it has long been popular in mainstream political science to refer to the "American liberal tradition" and to consider liberalism as the sole symbol of the American spirit. However, with the rise of the conservative movement in the 19th century, conservatism became an important trend in American politics, economy, and culture, and conservative scholars have tried to incorporate the "conservative tradition" into the American spirit, arguing that conservative values, ideas, and principles are deeply rooted in the trajectory of American history (Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955, p. 29). This is the source of the ideological fragmentation in contemporary American society, as liberalism and conservatism differ significantly on how to define America or how to understand the American spirit, and this conflict of ideas extends to other areas such as politics, economics, and society, resulting in social fragmentation and political disorder in America (Brinkley A, "The Problem of American Conservatism", *The American Historical Review*, 1994, 99(2)). Therefore, it is important to explore conservatism in the early period of the construction of the American political order in order to clarify the meaning of the American spirit, understand the contemporary American ideological disputes, and grasp the American realpolitik[1-3].

## **2. Conflicting Ideas in the Construction of Early American Political Order**

What role should religion play in the United States? Did the legitimacy of the American founding come from historical experience or abstract slogans? How should the relationship between the Union

and the states be handled? Should the United States establish aristocratic rule or democracy? These four questions were the most prominent issues in the construction of the early American political order, and they set the stage for the conceptual conflicts and contradictions in modern and contemporary America.

## 2.1 The City on the Hill and Religious Freedom

The founding of the United States was inextricably linked to religion. The colonists came to the New World with the ambition of establishing the "City on the Hill", and most of the people in the colonies had a devout faith in Christianity on the eve of the founding, and nine of the thirteen colonies had a state church established by law on the eve of the Revolution [4].

The founders of the United States of America also believed in the need for a religious basis for society, as is amply demonstrated by their speeches and works. Alexander Hamilton believed that wise statesmen understood that once morals had fallen, only the terror of despotism could restrain the impulsive passions of men and bind them with the demands of social obligation. Tocqueville similarly recognized the prominence of religious principles in American politics in his work of the 1830s (Marcia Pally. Protestants and American conservatism: A short history. *Political Theology*, 2019, 20 (8)).

But the Founding Fathers, who enshrined religious liberty in Article I of the First Amendment to the federal Constitution, were opposed to the establishment of Christianity as a state religion, and religious tolerance was their concern [5]. Among the Founding Fathers, Jefferson and Madison were the most opposed to the establishment of a state church, and although they had grown up with a strong Christian influence and had studied theology to some extent, they gradually gravitated toward natural theism, which had lost ground in general public opinion by 1776 but was quite common among certain patriot leaders created the universe and gave nature to all things, but did not interfere directly with human life (Levesque Paul. *Selective Amnesia Surround the Role of Religion in the Founding of the United States*. *The International Journal of the Humanities: Annual Review*, 2009, 6(11)).

Proponents of "religious liberty" believed that the union of state and church could only harm the church, and that the separation of church and state was an ancient Christian teaching; moreover, the clause prohibited Congress from abolishing or otherwise interfering with state churches in the states, and was therefore embraced locally [6].

Article I of the First Amendment, which is identical to much of the Constitution, may have been the result of a series of compromises. The adoption of this clause actually proves that Americans reached a consensus on two points: endorsing religious tolerance and leaving the issue of establishing a state church entirely to the states; and believing that a political order requires religious roots and that a moral order based on religious convictions underpins the political order [7-8].

## 2.2 Historical Experience and Abstract Slogans

Whether the legitimacy of the American Revolution was derived from the natural rights inherited from the English or from the natural rights in the mouths of Enlightenment thinkers, the conflict between the two views essentially represents the different claims of conservatism and liberalism, respectively. The former believes that American liberty and order grew "organically" out of the actual social experience of colonial peoples during the colonial era, not from abstract theoretical designs. Therefore, the "new order" established by the American Revolution was not intentional or the result of rebellion, but rather a result of experience and practical necessity, and its fundamental purpose was to defend the already established order and the existing rights of freedom (Zheng Yi-ping, Wang Wei-zhong. *The influence of Christian civilization on the American Revolution. Morality and Civilization*, 2004(04): 64-67). The latter view is that the American Revolution was the first modern revolution

against colonial rule, and that the Declaration of Independence is derived from Locke's ideas: 1) that all men are created equal; 2) that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; 3) that these rights include the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; 4) that in order to secure these rights, governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; 5) that when any form of government defeats these ends, the government of the people will be the only one that can be established [9-10]. Government undermines these ends, the people have the right, and the duty, to change or overthrow it in order to reconstitute the government in accordance with the above principles [11-12].

### **2.3 Federal Order and the Freedom of the States**

The United States began to face the tension between order and freedom when the Mayflower docked on the American continent. The Puritans who came from afar chose to give up some of their own liberty rights in order to establish a stable and peaceful New World Order, and together they signed the Mayflower Compact, the first political contract in the United States, and the patriots who supported independence during the gestation period of the American Revolution chose to secede from the suzerain state in order to defend the order and freedom of the colonies for a century. Up to this period, the tension between order and freedom in the American land was still harmonious and beneficial, and the United States transitioned from an era of barbarism to a state of colonial self-government and finally to an independent nation, from disorder to order, from barbarism to civilization, and order and rules were gradually established in all aspects of society, allowing the United States to develop at a rapid pace (Pang Jinyou, Liu Yingshuo. The conflict of the concept of people's sovereignty during the American Constitutional Convention. *Journal of Tianjin Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 2013 (05): 38-42).

After the founding of the United States, the country faced internal and external problems, the political order was precarious, the internal states could not reach unity, the freedom of citizens could not be guaranteed, and the external national independence was in danger. Whether or not to establish a stronger central government became the focus of debate between federalists and confederates, which in effect created two different ideas and factions within the United States regarding the choice between order and freedom. Thanks to the conservative tendencies of the founding delegates - a belief in religion, a cherishing of order and community, an affirmation of slow change, and an adherence to the virtues of prudence and restraint - the Constitutional Convention ultimately arrived at a federal constitution that was responsive to the needs and experiences of the day and effectively bridged the differences between the parties on the issue of order and liberty.

However, the demand for order and the demand for freedom still became the key factors affecting the American political order, and the American political order was bound to face a serious situation when the relationship between the two was bad.

### **2.4 Natural aristocracy and equality for all**

As to whether people are completely equal, conservatives advocate the existence of a natural aristocracy and believe that an aristocracy exists at all stages of social development. Although the American Founding Fathers were deeply influenced by Rousseau and other Enlightenmenters, most of them were skeptical of the abstract slogan of "full equality of all men". They were mostly realists who believed in the equality of all people before the law and religion, and recognized the existence of innate differences in physical appearance, health and strength, and intelligence between people, as well as the rationality of inherited differences that led to the formation of wealth and status classes. As a result, the Founders did not face much controversy over this issue when they drafted the U.S. Constitution.

In fact, the conflict between liberalism and conservatism was embedded in the early American conceptions: first, conservatism believed in Christianity and considered history, experience, and tradition as the way to understand God's intentions, while liberalism attached little importance to these concepts and preferred abstract slogans; second, conservatism valued freedom under order and considered order as the key factor to guarantee political, cultural, and social continuity, while liberalism believes that freedom is the highest pursuit; third, conservatism believes that there is a natural aristocracy in every society and that complete equality for all is a false lie, while liberalism [13-14].

In short, the importance of religious beliefs and "created equal" in early America were overwhelmingly agreed upon, although there were different views; the tension between order and liberty was in a state of flux. The tension between order and freedom was in a state of flux. Although there was a certain amount of conceptual conflict in American society during this period, it was always effectively balanced in the end, allowing the United States to develop rapidly and become a superpower under a peaceful and effective political order [15-17].

### **3. The Political Wisdom of American Conservatism: Bridging the Conflict**

Both liberalism and conservatism have different views on the early American political construction period, but it is undeniable that both liberalism and conservatism are deeply engraved in the early American history, and the spirit and ideas of conservatism played an important role in constructing the early American political order.

First, during the colonial period, conservatism's devotion to religious faith and reverence for order helped the North American continent move from barbarism to civilization. In addition, the burghers of the colonies, as champions of conservatism, actively participated in public affairs to improve the political order and stabilize the moral order of the townships.

Second, at the time of the founding of the United States, conservatives issued a deafening defense of the legitimacy of American independence: the American Revolution was an attempt to resist the encroachment of the suzerain state on the existing rights and liberties of the colonists and to preserve the existing order and traditions of the colonies. At the same time, it was conservative restraint and prudence that prevented the United States from descending into the abyss of the French Revolution, a political hell of total disorder. The Declaration of Independence, with its blend of natural law and Christianity, had a strong conservative flavor.

Finally, in the early years of the United States, when the country faced internal and external problems, conservatism effectively bridged the conflicting tensions between federalists and anti-federalists over order and freedom, resulting in a masterpiece of political compromise, the Federal Constitution, which effectively established the political order that has survived to this day.

In other words, conservatism played an indispensable role in the construction and stabilization of the early American political order, and played a crucial role in the life and death of the early American political order, injecting a never-ending spirit into American politics.

First, conservatism's emphasis on religion facilitated the formation of the foundation of early American communal identity. On the one hand, the first colonists accepted the special mission given to them by God and were determined to build a just society for the world to follow, and the colonial Puritans formed a common sense of mission to build the City on the Hill; on the other hand, the Mayflower Compact described the origin of the United States of America as a covenant before God for people to participate in the construction of the myth of the origin of the United States of America. These two aspects formed the basis of early American communal identity, and it can be said that religion became the cornerstone of early American national identity.

Second, the prudence and moderation of conservatism saved early America from falling into the

dilemma of revolutionary radicalism and promoted the development of American constitutionalism. Compared to France, which was caught in the pain of revolution, the American Revolution was undoubtedly conservative and restrained, aiming to preserve and perpetuate the colonial past rather than severing from it. The 1787 Constitution was the best way to settle the revolution and resolve its hostility. The Founding Fathers understood that the revolution was not an end in itself, but rather the reestablishment of political order, and that the central task after the revolution was how to safeguard the gains of the revolution. In the face of the post-revolutionary debate between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists over order and liberty, most of the "conservative" Framers realized that while liberty was a worthy goal, if it lost its roots - its historical and constitutional structure - it would inevitably face The "conservative" Constitution makers recognized that liberty was a worthy goal, but that if it lost its foundations - its history and constitutional structure - it would inevitably face the tragic and paradoxical fate of withering away.

In the end, conservative compromise stabilized and perpetuated the fragile early American political order, reflecting a practical wisdom of the middle way. Compromise is not a metaphor for a weak compromise, but rather highlights the timeliness and appropriateness of it, i.e., making the most appropriate decisions and actions based on experience and reality. When the rights of the colonists were violated by the sovereign state, the colonists did not choose to give in, but insisted on defending the existing order and tradition of the colony. When faced with the conflict of rights between the Union and the states after the founding of the nation, the Constitutional Convention did not resolutely uphold one of the rights and ignore the balance between the two rights, resulting in a Constitution that balanced order and freedom and was consistent with the American condition.

It is evident that conservatism played an important role in the construction of the early American political order on the one hand, and its necessity on the other, as it always played a crucial role in the life-or-death moments of the early American political order. However, contemporary conservatism in the United States has gradually turned to extremes, and its religious, cultural, economic, and racial ideas are in sharp opposition to those of the Democratic Organization, and the cracks and divisions within the conservative camp are growing, all of which further push American politics toward polarization and shake the political order that has existed in the United States for more than two hundred years. As to the future direction of the American political order, it seems that contemporary American conservatism should regain its original piety, moderation and prudence, and look for valuable resources in conservative thought that can save the American political order again.

## References

- [1] Dominic Lynch. Review: *The roots of American conservatism* [J]. *America*, 2018, 219(13)
- [2] Marcia Pally. *Protestants and American conservatism: A short history* [J]. *Political Theology*, 2019, 20(8)
- [3] Ethan Fishman. *American Conservatism 2012: A Historical Perspective* [J]. *Perspectives on Political Science*, 2012, 41(1)
- [4] Murphey, Dwight D. *Reappraising the Right: The Past and Future of American Conservatism* [J]. *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies*, 2011, 36(3)
- [5] Brad Lowell Stone. *The Paradox at the Heart of American Conservatism* [J]. *Perspectives on Political Science*, 2012, 41(1)
- [6] Julian E. Zelizer. *Reflections: Rethinking the History of American Conservatism* [J]. *Reviews in American History*, 2010, 38(2)
- [7] Michael, Zuckerman. *American Conservatism in Historical Perspective* [J]. *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2008, 6(2)
- [8] Robert G. McCloskey. *American Conservatism and the Democratic Tradition* [J]. *The Review of Politics*, 1951, 13(1):
- [9] Katherine Carté. *Doubt and American Christianity*[J]. *Reviews in American History*, 2020, 48(2)
- [10] Randall J., Stephens, Thomas S. Kidd. *Religion and the Founding of the United States: An Interview with Thomas Kidd* [J]. *Historically Speaking*, 2011, 12(1)
- [11] Levesque Paul. *Selective Amnesia Surround the Role of Religion in the Founding of the United States* [J]. *The*

*International Journal of the Humanities: Annual Review*, 2009, 6(11)

[12] Samuel P. Huntington. *Conservatism as an Ideology* [J]. *American Political Science Review*. 1957 (2)

[13] Grant Farred. *Endgame Identity? Mapping the New Left Roots of Identity Politics* [J]. *New Literary History*. 2000 (4)

[14] Sabareesh Gopala Pillai. *Identity and Class* [J]. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 2010 (23)

[15] Marcel Gauchet, Pierre Manent, Alain Finkielkraut, Paul Seaton, Daniel J. Mahoney. *The Perils of Identity Politics* [J]. *Journal of Democracy*. 2004 (3)

[16] Vanessa Williamson, Theda Skocpol, John Coggin. *The Tea Organization and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* [J]. *Perspectives on Politics*. 2011 (1)

[17] Woody Holton. *An "Excess of Democracy": Or a Shortage: The Federalists' Earliest Adversaries* [J]. *Journal of the Early Republic*. 2005 (3)