

“The Future of American Conservatism”

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Lecture Summary

Dr. David W. Brady traced the history of the conservative movement in the United States beginning with the “national greatness” conservatives such as Abraham Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt, who created the Republican Party on Whig ideals. They believed in big government, and are often called “borrow-and-spend” conservatives. Next, there are “paleo-conservatives” who subscribe to isolationism, protectionism, nativism, and the culture of life. These conservatives, such as Pat Buchanan, support increased tariffs and “traditional” family values. Finally, there are libertarian conservatives who are pro-market and anti-regulation. They favor limited government and prioritize civil liberties, and are generally liberal on social issues. In the past, there was a history of Northern Republicans and Southern Democrats getting together and dominating Congress through the Conservative Coalition. However, the parties went through a sorting, and these groups no longer interact.

American conservatism is split between two factions. On one hand, economic conservatives favor markets over government regulation and planning. On the other hand, social conservatives, or the “religious right”, desire government prohibition of abortion and gay marriage. This leads to the seemingly contradictory but common identification of being an economic conservative and social liberal, or a social conservative and economic liberal. That is to say, they can intermix. But these groups don’t get along, and the scuffling takes place within the Republican Party. The libertarian branch disagrees with the evangelical right-wing branch and wants to deemphasize social issues. But, the religious right argues that they are not the ones who started the war or deregulated Wall Street.

According to Dr. Brady, conservatism faces several major problems. First, most Republican supporters are working, lower middle class. They care about income security and tax reform, which goes against the ideology of economic conservatives. Second, a long-term problem facing Republicans is that they are giving up their potential for growth with Latinos and young voters on immigration and social issues, respectively. But conservatives cannot reverse the sexual revolution and should not try. Third, many conservative leaders are old white men, and they have not been replaced by the new generation. Finally, despite the belief in the U.S. that the recession will pass and jobs will come back, the economic future is bleak. The U.S. needs to deal with publicly held debt and unfunded liabilities, but entitlements keep going up and this rising dependency on entitlements causes most U.S. fiscal problems. Dr. Brady argued that the solution for this problem is to slow growth in benefits for social security, make higher copayments and more choices for Medicare, and reform Medicaid. Of course, he pointed out that the likelihood that this agenda will get passed in the current climate is next to nothing.