

## Topic 9.2

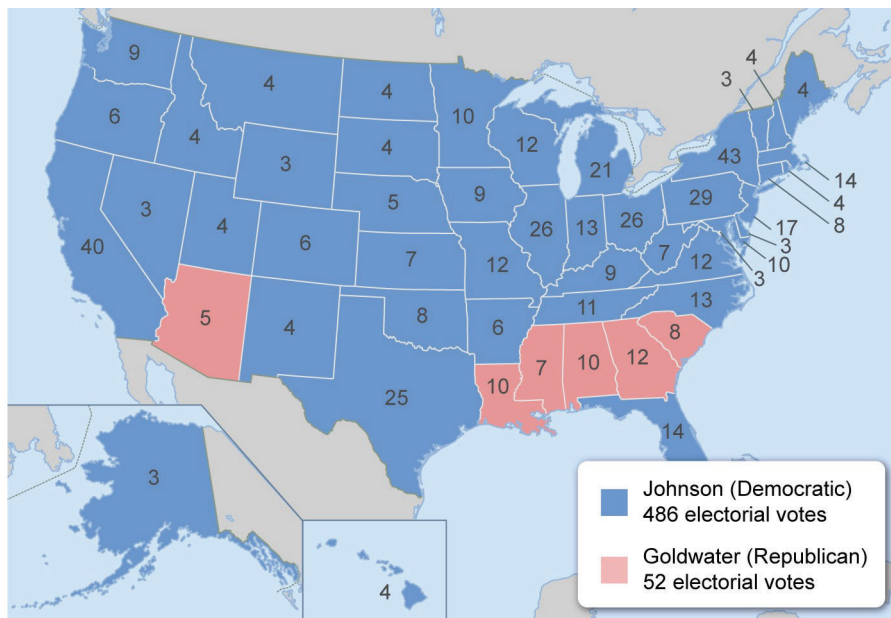
# Reagan and Conservatism

## You Will Learn To:

- Explain the causes and effects of the new conservatism in politics and society.

## America's Right Turn

Republican Senator Barry Goldwater planted the seeds for a new conservatism with his unsuccessful 1964 presidential bid, during which he called for significant reductions in the size and scope of the federal government.



Election of 1964

Yet by 1980, voters were more receptive to calls for small government than they were in the 1960s. This shift in thinking helped propel a "new" conservative movement that challenged the liberal programs of the New Deal and the Great Society.

Recall from Topic 8.14 the major economic, social, and political challenges facing the United States during the 1970s:

Economic	Social	Political
Stagflation	Forced busing	Assassinations
Real wages decline	Racial tensions	Watergate
Deindustrialization	Rights Revolution	Vietnam War
Rising energy costs	Urban unrest	Loss of trust in government

By the 1970s, the post-WWII economic boom was over, resulting in:

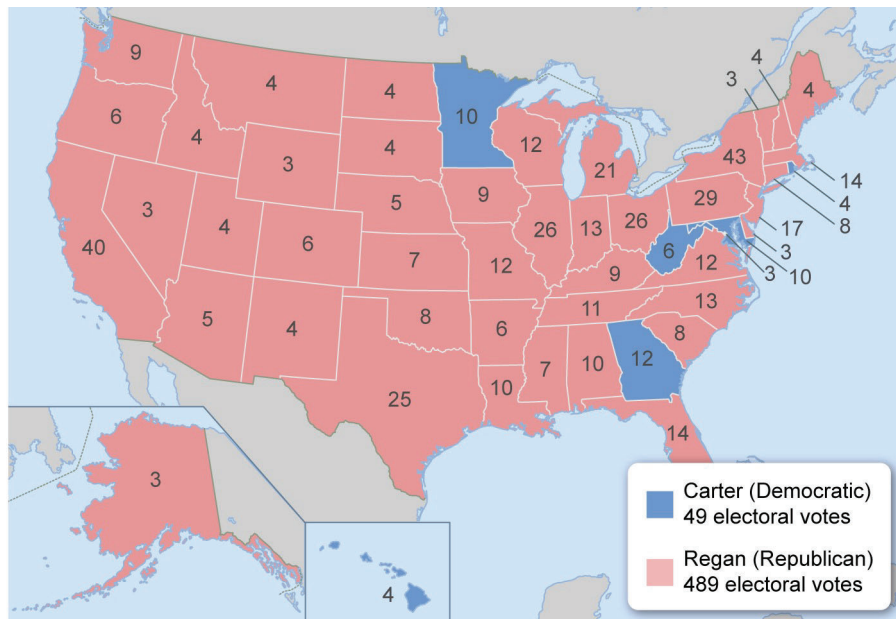
- reduced wages.
- decreased purchasing power.

Besides challenging liberal programs, the New Right Agenda also appealed to Americans who wanted to move past the social turbulence of the long 1960s. Many American voters were ready for a new brand of conservatism, or neoconservatism, calling for:

- less government regulation,
- fewer federal social programs,
- a return to "traditional" social values.

## The Election of 1980

In 1980, Americans looked for change in Ronald Reagan, the once actor and former governor of California. The presidential election that year signaled a political realignment as the Republican Party won over many voters from the fading New Deal Coalition.



The election of President Ronald Reagan resulted in the rebranding of the Republican Party as one of fiscal and social conservatism.

## New Right Policy

This Republican resurgence was labeled the New Right Agenda, and it represented a stark contrast to the moderate Republicanism of the 1950s.



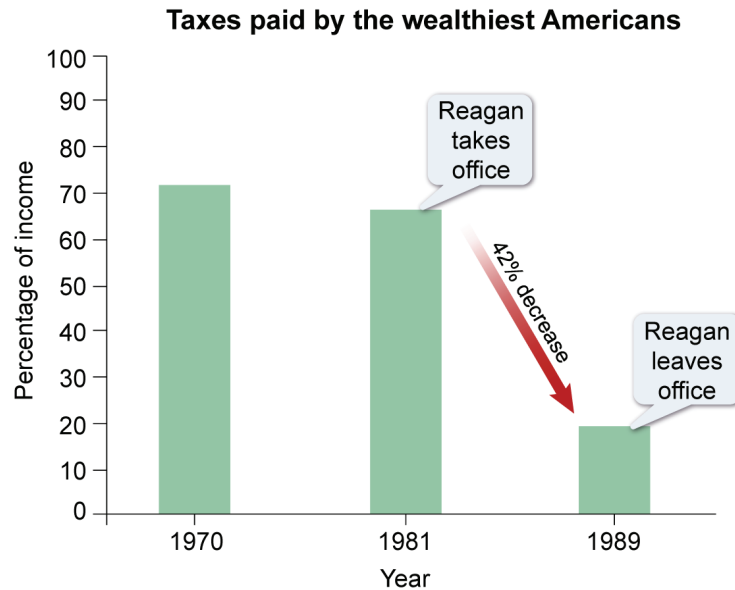
Republicans sought to remove federal regulations on businesses and reduce social programs that they believed were restricting economic growth and perpetuating a harmful welfare state.

### Supply-Side Economics

A key part of Reagan's campaign was his economic plan, a set of dramatic tax cuts meant to get the economy moving again.



Known as supply-side economics, Reagan's policy involved expanding the economy by reducing taxes and removing federal regulations. Reagan and other Republicans pointed to existing regulations and high taxes as the cause of high prices, reduced employment, and lower wages.



Reagan believed that freeing up income for the wealthiest taxpayers would result in that income being reinvested in the economy, ultimately benefiting everyone.

### Spending Cuts

Reagan and conservatives believed big government programs limited economic growth. In large part, Reagan sought to reverse or weaken the policies of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society and his War on Poverty. Republicans viewed these social programs as counterproductive because they fostered dependency on the federal government.

### The Financial Sector

Reaganites also wanted to end decades of finance regulations. Conservatives believed the banking restrictions imposed during the New Deal weakened economic growth. During the 1980s, corporations experienced record profits as those restrictions were lifted and the federal government became more pro-business.



Source: Library of Congress

However, the collapse of the savings and loan industry in 1987 resulted in many liberals challenging conservative economic policies and demanding reform of the US financial system. Neoconservatives pushed for less financial regulation while liberals supported governmental controls, leading to continued debates about the role of government.

### Trade

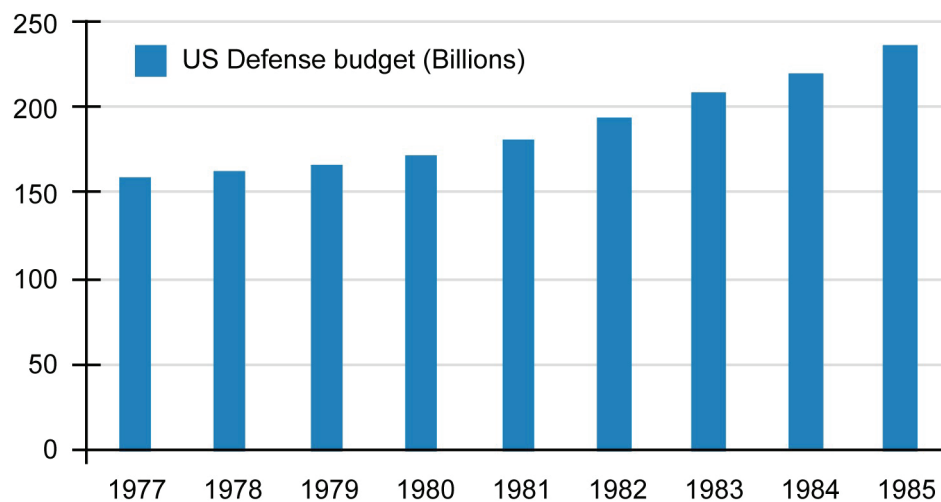
Republicans also wished to lower trade barriers with other nations and open international markets to US businesses. Reagan believed fewer trade restrictions would lead to a more peaceful international order. Yet, critics of free trade feared the loss of protective tariffs would threaten American jobs.



Reagan's ideas paid off in the form of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Signed in 1992 by Reagan's successor, President George H.W. Bush, the agreement opened trade between the US, Canada, and Mexico. The result was lower prices for consumers as companies decreased labor costs by relocating their factories south of the border. However, millions of American manufacturing jobs were lost due to increased competition.

### Defense Spending

Finally, Republicans called for more defense spending. The New Right was dissatisfied with the stalemate of the Cold War and uncomfortable with the loss of American prestige in the world.



Therefore, a central piece of the New Right policies was more defense spending on updated military hardware and a renewed interest in winning the Cold War.



## Dismantling the Welfare State

Although cuts to social programs like Social Security were a primary goal of neoconservatives, the idea proved very unpopular with Americans. The effectiveness and longevity of the New Deal and Great Society social programs had made them fixtures in American life—leaving these programs nearly untouchable for subsequent presidential administrations.

By 1980, millions of aging Americans benefited from Social Security checks and Medicare, the government-backed health insurance for those over 65. In 1982, Republicans lost seats in the US House as voters rejected any cuts to Social Security benefits.



Source: Social Security Administration

However, in 1996, the Republican majority in Congress forced Democratic President Bill Clinton to sign the Welfare Reform Act. The landmark law shifted much of the responsibility for welfare payments to the states and carried work requirements for recipients.

## Cultural Backlash and the Rise of the Moral Majority

Republicans promoted "traditional family values," such as traditional gender roles and a backlash against the gay rights movement, legalized abortion, and easier access to divorce. In short, they sought to undo the social and political reforms made by women and minority groups during the Rights Revolution.



Source: Library of Congress

The liberalism of the 1960s' social landscape had ushered in new laws to protect racial minorities and women. Many older Americans viewed the counterculture movement of the 1960s and gains made by gay Americans in the 1970s as attacks on the traditional social order.

### Changing Gender Roles

Social conservatives opposed the gains made by second-wave feminists. These traditionalists feared the breakdown of family structures.



For example, Phyllis Schlafly's Stop ERA campaign successfully convinced many conservative women that the Equal Rights Amendment would erase women's special status in American society. Activists for this campaign were suburban women concerned that women's rights had gone too far, resulting in easy access to birth control, divorce on demand, and the breakdown of the two-parent home.

### Rise of the Religious Right

Many conservative Christians who had largely avoided national politics until the 1970s felt under siege by the political left. Religious Right activists believed the liberal Supreme Court decisions of the 1960s such as *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), had caused the nation to stray from its Christian heritage. Many on the Right sought to reverse the Court's ban on prayer in public schools.

## Reagan's Vision for America

American voters endorsed Reagan's conservative vision for America in 1984, when he easily won re-election, capturing all but two states. Conservatives credited Reagan's policies with the surging economy of the 1980s, while liberals were critical of his leadership, pointing to mounting budget deficits and spending cuts to social programs.

Reagan's vision of a national American identity was a departure from the focus on gender and race in political movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The president embraced an America that he described as a "city upon a hill," a country of promise open to anyone who wanted to come.

However, members of Reagan's Republican coalition would find themselves on opposing sides in the decades to come. Business-minded conservatives seeking to broaden the labor market welcomed the increase in Latin American and Asian immigration and supported immigration reform. However, social conservatives believed the increase in migrants threatened America's traditional identity.

## Things to Remember

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1. The election of 1980 marked a conservative re-emergence in American politics and society as conservatives took power with the goal of reducing the role of the federal government in people's lives.
2. President Reagan's economic policies centered on reducing taxes and the effects of government regulation on business.
3. Social conservatives, led by evangelical Christians, aligned with the Republican Party to restore traditional American values.

### Topic 9.2 Key Terms and Developments

Deindustrialization

Deregulation

Election of 1980

Moral Majority

Neoconservatives

New Right

Realignment

Sun Belt

Supply-side economics



## 9.2 Check for Understanding

- 1. Which of the following individuals would be most likely to support Reagan's policies?**
  - A. A business owner
  - B. An environmentalist
  - C. A social worker
  - D. A welfare recipient
- 2. Which of the following was a key component of Reagan's economic policies?**
  - A. Increased government spending to stimulate demand
  - B. Lower taxes to encourage business growth
  - C. Decreases in defense spending to balance the federal budget
  - D. Increases in federal regulation to protect consumers
- 3. Reagan's key support came from which of the following?**
  - A. Evangelical Christians
  - B. Urban Americans
  - C. Feminists
  - D. Ethnic minorities
- 4. According to supply-side economics, deregulation of industries would lead to**
  - A. an economic downturn
  - B. increased economic growth
  - C. higher tariffs
  - D. the growth of the welfare state
- 5. Which of the following was a major cause for the New Right's growth in the 1970s?**
  - A. Increased social turmoil
  - B. Economic growth in the manufacturing sector
  - C. An increase in national morale
  - D. The decline of suburban influence
- 6. The New Right's rapid growth occurred in**
  - A. rural areas
  - B. suburban communities
  - C. American universities
  - D. urban areas in the Rust Belt

**7. Members of the New Right sought which of the following?**

- A. Expansion of government social programs
- B. An increase in in the minimum wage
- C. Increased tariffs to protect manufacturing jobs
- D. Returning power back to state governments