

# Tradition--the Beating Heart of a Democracy

---

 [realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/01/13/tradition--the\\_beating\\_heart\\_of\\_a\\_democracy.html](http://realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/01/13/tradition--the_beating_heart_of_a_democracy.html)

By Peter Berkowitz

RCP Contributor

January 13, 2015

Conservatives have enjoyed quite a comeback since the winter of 2009. But the inherent tension in the conservative imperative to blend liberty and tradition ensures that their path forward will be anything but certain.

Six years ago, a newly inaugurated President Obama enjoyed sky-high approval and his party controlled the Senate and the House of Representatives. In a February 2009 speech to a joint session of Congress, in the midst of the worst economic downturn in 60 years, he boldly announced plans for far-reaching, progressive reforms of health care, energy, and education. Democrats applauded his determination to enact his agenda with or without Republicans. Progressive pundits confidently prophesied that a generation or two would pass before conservatives would be able to purge the extremists from their midst, quell the internecine warfare between social conservatives and libertarians, and repackage themselves drastically enough to win a majority of an electorate increasingly composed of nonwhites.

Six Januarys later the president's approval rating has not risen above 50 percent for more than a year. A majority of citizens has opposed the Affordable Care Act for much of the period since before he signed it into law in March 2010. Thanks to their mid-term rout of the Democrats in November, Republicans enjoy a comfortable majority in the Senate, a commanding majority in the House and an all-but-unprecedented domination in state governments. A strong field of Republicans, several under 50, is preparing to run for the 2016 presidential nomination.

Conservatives, though, should not be overconfident—and not only because pride goes before a fall.

It's true that voters seem increasingly open to conservative arguments about limited government. But much of the credit must go to the incumbent president. Contrary to his repeated promises, costs to the middle class have risen under Obamacare while choices have narrowed. Obama's own overreach has made the case for limited government more forcefully than has any Republican politician. But he won't be in the White House forever.

Another reason for conservatives to maintain their composure is that to combine and to reconcile the competing demands of liberty and tradition—the defining task of modern American conservatism—has never been more daunting.

Much as some fiscal conservatives would like to deny the connection, limited government cannot be separated from the character of its citizens. If individuals are not determined to make decisions for themselves and take responsibility for their lives; if they are not nurtured by family, rooted in community and sustained by faith or a firm sense of duty; and if they are not educated to grasp the principles of freedom and to appreciate freedom's blessings—then they will not experience an increasingly activist and ever-expanding government as an affront and a danger. To the contrary, they will welcome it as a comfort and a consolation.

Still, conservatives face a bind. Their principles and a prudent assessment of the likely abuses preclude champions of limited government from entrusting the souls of citizens to the care of the state. At the same time, conservatives confront the need not merely to preserve but to restore.

One of modern conservatism's great achievements has been to recover an understanding of the moral principles, the virtues of mind and character, and the associations on which liberal democracy depends. But recovering and conserving are different tasks. For John Locke in the 17th century, Edmund Burke in the 18th, and Alexis de Tocqueville in the 19th, exploring the role of religion, family, civic association, and education in securing liberty was largely a matter of describing existing beliefs, practices, and institutions. While it would be a mistake to compress these seminal thinkers into contemporary notions of right and left, much of the political action on behalf of liberty they contemplated, and in some cases advocated, was intrinsically conservative.

Since Locke, Burke, and Tocqueville wrote, the institutions they identified as indispensable to the formation of free and equal citizens have been hemmed in and hollowed out. Thus, conservatives must go beyond conserving. The question at the heart of conservatism today is this: what reforms, consistent with limited government, are capable of restoring the institutions that cultivate the virtues on which liberty and democracy depend?

In "Freedom and Friendship," in the winter issue of *National Affairs*, columnist James Poulos of *The Daily Beast* seeks to refine the conservative understanding of that question and to suggest a new focus for reform.

His point of departure is Tocqueville's potent observation that "nothing is more fertile in marvels than the art of being free, but nothing is harder than freedom's apprenticeship." That apprenticeship, Poulos argues, has been rendered even more difficult by the tendency of both the state and the markets to erode freedom.

To meet the public's demands for equality, the ever-expanding administrative state arrogates power, curtailing freedom by imposing uniformity. Meanwhile, driven by workers' industriousness, magnified by competition, and operating through globalization and the

Internet, market forces generate massive disparities of wealth. While undercutting the equality the state aggressively pursues, these market dynamics reinforce a dependence on government that the state actively encourages.

Right-wing Tocquevillians have long taken to heart the Frenchman's prescient warning, nicely captured by Poulos, that while "little is more important to conserve than the habits of life that make freedom intelligible and its art practicable," in democracies "few things slip away more easily." So they urge a return to stable, two-parent families; the rebuilding of tight-knit communities; the renewal of religious faith; and the revival of an education that undergirds character and disciplines the mind.

Majorities have not been moved by conservatives' call. This, as Poulos argues, is in part because of our citizens' increasingly tenuous understanding of the connection between freedom and the habits of heart and mind that foster it. We associate autonomy with doing as we please rather than living in accordance with laws whose wisdom we recognize and respect. And we confuse our restless quest for novelty with the essence of a life freely lived.

Many conservative arguments and admonitions fall on deaf ears because they conflict with common experience in contemporary America. For large numbers of citizens, the appeal to traditional family, neighborhood and church rankle because they represent the imposition of arbitrary and outmoded hierarchies and constraints. Virtue and duty evoke in many the specter of unwanted, unjustified authority.

Traditional liberal education is frequently dismissed as an exercise in antiquarian veneration of racist and sexist attitudes. The summons to national greatness through the promotion of liberty at home and abroad is often perceived as an arrogant desire to compel others to adopt parochial American preferences. And the preaching of a civic religion grounded in the founders' grand metaphysical propositions about human equality and unalienable rights set forth in the Declaration of Independence presupposes a degree of piety that is difficult to discover, much less to arouse in our secular age.

Poulos argues that instead of civil society, politics, or religion, a more promising focus for conservatives is friendship. Although not a political relationship, friendship is rich with political benefits, he argues. In contrast to conservative efforts directed at return or restoration, the reclaiming of friendship does not require submission to external authority, tight associational ties, or affirmation of the deity. It offers a reconciliation of our yearning for union with others and our desire to express our individuality. It eases the human temptation, exacerbated by democracy, to envy those with more, and soothes the propensity, amplified by freedom, to take pride in asserting the superiority of one's will over others. Its inherent need for compromise prepares us to be ruled and to rule in turn.

Despite his criticism of conservative attempts to use the Declaration of Independence as a basis for a civic religion, Poulos finds in the Declaration's concluding lines a model for friendship that he believes can help rejuvenate the ebbing art of freedom. In proclaiming that "we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor," the signatories to the Declaration, Poulos contends, themselves exemplify "friendship in equal freedom," that is, friendship grounded in the experience of each as free and equal because of a shared humanity.

The Declaration does not produce friendship in equal freedom, he maintains; rather, "the experience of friendship in equal freedom" produced the Declaration and fostered the determination to introduce "that experience into political life." Such friendship is open to all, and does not depend on religious faith or metaphysical belief. The pledge that the founders' friendship generates is a joint and freely chosen act that voluntarily establishes duties and lays the foundations for political association.

Unfortunately, instead of solving the problem he vividly formulates, Poulos offers a remedy that restates it. Friendship cannot substitute for the renewal of family, community, faith, and education because the capacity for friendship depends on the manner in which these form character. We cannot learn to respect pledges, acquire fortunes, and make sacrifices to vindicate our sacred honor without the restoration of the very beliefs, practices, and associations for which Poulos thinks friendship can substitute. Indeed, the Declaration's signatories explicitly offer their pledge "with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence." And their Declaration affirms that their experience of freedom and equality is inextricably connected to convictions about natural rights and the proper purpose of government.

The conservative task will remain bound up with restoration and renewal. Winning majority support over an extended period of time for that daunting enterprise will severely test conservatives' judgment, fortitude, and powers of persuasion. Progressives, however, should hardly take comfort. Easing the conflicts and paradoxes with which conservatives grapple is essential to safeguarding the freedom and equality to which the left as well as the right profess allegiance.

*Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](http://PeterBerkowitz.com) and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.*