

## **Conservatism** <sup>[1]</sup>

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See also: [Conservative Party](#) <sup>[2]</sup>; [Democratic Party](#) <sup>[3]</sup>; [Progressivism](#) <sup>[4]</sup>; [Republican Party](#) <sup>[5]</sup>.

Conservatism is a school of thought emphasizing the need to maintain traditional order and institutions in the face of radical change. Although its usage has evolved with North Carolina's changing political identity, conservatism is typically viewed as being in opposition to another school of thought known as liberalism or progressivism. These terms have been intimately connected with one another, often serving as the principal rationale for a number of political movements and events occurring in North Carolina—both within the state's long-dominant [Democratic Party](#) <sup>[3]</sup> and in the modern-day divide between national Democratic and Republican agendas. In reality, many North Carolina politicians have embodied both traditions simultaneously, acting on conservative or [progressive](#) <sup>[4]</sup> views depending on the issue.

Political conservatism in the United States is rooted in the [Anti-Federalist](#) <sup>[6]</sup> opposition to the U.S. Constitution and in the faction that evolved from that opposition, the Jeffersonian Republican Party. One such Republican was [Nathaniel Macon](#) <sup>[7]</sup> (1758-1837) of [Warren County](#) <sup>[8]</sup>, regarded as the state's first spokesman of the conservative tradition. Macon, a U.S. representative, senator, and strong Anti-Federalist, became a leading political figure in the early nineteenth century. He had all of the philosophical predispositions that were to become characteristic of two centuries of North Carolina conservatism: he was an advocate of [state rights](#) <sup>[9]</sup>, a believer in strict construction of the U.S. Constitution, a proponent of laissez faire and maximum individual liberty, and a supporter of limited government and low taxes. As a southern planter, he was also a defender of slavery. Because of his opposition to most appropriations and innovations of the time, Macon was dubbed a "negative radical."

The conservative pattern was well established in North Carolina politics by the mid-nineteenth century, with [Zebulon B. Vance](#) <sup>[10]</sup>, a Civil War governor, emerging as a major advocate of state rights. He was a leader in the postwar effort to organize the state Conservatives to challenge the Radicals (i.e., Republicans). Later, as a Democratic U.S. senator, he stressed the importance of government economy and opposed the expansion of federal power in almost every sphere. Although Vance grudgingly accepted the role of African Americans in state politics, he supported strict [segregation](#) <sup>[11]</sup> of the races. This was typical of nearly all white North Carolina leaders at the time; even [Charles B. Aycock](#) <sup>[12]</sup>, known for his progressive-minded promotion of [public school](#) <sup>[13]</sup> development and "universal education" during his 1901-5 term as governor, was an unabashed advocate of white supremacy.

Vance was succeeded as leader of the conservative forces within the Democratic Party by the even more conservative Senator [Furnifold M. Simmons](#) <sup>[14]</sup>, who played a key role in crushing the [Fusion](#) <sup>[15]</sup> of Republicans and Populists in 1898 and in [disfranchising](#) <sup>[16]</sup> blacks in 1900. Simmons was the primary political mover in the state in the first 30 years of the twentieth century; however, his refusal to support Al Smith for president in 1928, largely because of Smith's opposition to Prohibition, led to his political downfall in 1930.

While the hardships of the Great Depression and the perceived benefits of the New Deal produced an even greater Democratic monopoly in North Carolina from 1930 to 1959, they also established cracks in the southern Democrats' conservative armor. Many North Carolinians slowly awakened to the benefits of strong, centralized government—such as the development of the [public university system](#) <sup>[17]</sup> and the construction of roads—although traditional pro-business attitudes and the concurrent opposition to organized labor remained. One recent historian has maintained that much of the state's leadership during this period "used progressive rhetoric to mask a staunch conservatism."

By the 1960s, the traditional conservative and progressive factions within the Democratic Party had grown increasingly combative. This was largely due to domination of the national party by the northeastern states and its liberal stance on labor unions, women's rights, sexual morality, abortion rights, the welfare state, national defense, and—most important—[civil rights](#) <sup>[18]</sup> and the [desegregation of schools](#) <sup>[19]</sup>. Although early in the decade both Democratic and Republican politicians in North Carolina ran on segregationist platforms to secure statewide and national positions, far-reaching federal civil rights measures soon prompted Democrats to abandon either their conservatism or their party. Many—including longtime North Carolina senator Jesse Helms—chose the latter option; much of what had been the traditional political turf of conservative Democrats relocated to the Republican Party, which became a bastion of conservatism on several key issues. As a result, Republican strength grew in the state. In 1972 [James E. Holshouser Jr.](#) <sup>[20]</sup> became the first Republican elected governor of North Carolina in the twentieth century. In the same year Helms won his first election to the U.S. Senate, becoming the first North Carolina conservative who was in every sense a national figure, with a following and an organization that stretched far beyond the state.

Helms's career was emblematic of the break between the conservative and progressive factions within the state Democratic Party, and his conversion to Republicanism was a bellwether of the mass exodus of the state's conservative voters from the liberal Democratic camp during the second half of the twentieth century. Although conservatism continues to exist in both major parties—many North Carolina Democrats are pro-business, advocate a strong military, and consider

themselves "fiscal conservatives" while maintaining more liberal stances on other issues-it is the modern-day Republicans who are viewed as the primary inheritors of the state's conservative traditions.

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## Additional Resources:

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## Subjects:

Political movements and parties <sup>[24]</sup>

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Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press. <sup>[27]</sup>

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