Adam I. P. Smith

The emergence of conservatism as a political concept in the United States before the Civil War

Introduction

In 1848, the writer for a religious weekly noted that "conservative" and "conservatism" were now used "so frequently" that it "becomes a matter of some surprise how our predecessors managed to dispense with them so generally."[1] The author might have added—though it barely needed saying—that these were terms that were laden with weighty, sometimes contradictory but almost always positive connotations. So self-evidently important were these political concepts that newspaper editors, ministers and politicians all offered disquisitions on their meaning and significance, earnestly distinguishing between "true" and "false" conservatism.

[1] *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine*, Feb 19, 1848, 141.

In the widest sense, the self-described "conservatism" of nineteenth-century Americans was a reflection of a political culture which placed the highest moral value on defense of the Constitution and the Union.[2] US politics was hardly short of profound division yet compared to most European states the extent of the constitutional consensus was striking. This was a "post-revolutionary" politics in the sense that the break from the British Empire and the nation-building project that followed was so culturally and politically sacrosanct that any prospect of future revolution was regarded as revanchism of the most dangerous kind—as the secessionists of 1861 were to discover. This was what Nathaniel Hawthorne meant when he proclaimed in his campaign biography of Franklin Pierce that, "all the greatest statesmen of America stand in the attitude of a conservative"; and it was what Daniel Webster had in mind when he said in 1848 that "the whole progress of the American system, [is] marked by a peculiar conservatism."[3] It was why British Chartists or revolutionary émigrés from continental Europe sometimes declared themselves to be conservatives in their new home; as James Fennimore Cooper put it,

[2] I use political culture in this essay in the sense it is used by other scholars of nineteenth-century politics to describe the networks of ideas, assumptions and associations within which political choices were made. There were numerous political "sub-cultures" overlapping in the nineteenth-century political world—transnational political cultures, nationally-framed cultures and local and partisan cultures. For useful discussions of the concept, see Glenda M. Patrick, "Political Culture," in Giovanni Sartori, ed., *Social Science Concepts: A Systematic Analysis* (Beverley Hills: Sage, 1984) 265-314; Glen Gendzel, "Political Culture: Genealogy of a Concept," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History,* 28 (Autumn 1997): 225-250.

[3] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Life of Franklin Pierce* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed and Fields, 1852), 112; Edward Everett, *The Works of Daniel Webster* (6 vols, Boston, 1890 edn), VI: 221.

"here [in America], the democrat is the conservative, and thank God he has something worth preserving."[4] Under a monarchy, explained an Ohio newspaper in 1858, conservatism was "the foe of popular liberty"; but in a republic "where political and social movements, being accorded the largest liberty, tend to extremes" it operates as a "wholesome check, retraining excesses."[5] Americans fought bitterly over the meaning of their experiment in popular sovereignty but they shared the assumption that it was the responsibility of each generation to perpetuate the republican institutions they had inherited. And so, in this general sense, a certain sort of "peculiar" (because post-revolutionary) conservatism came naturally. Yet when the term "conservative" initially appeared in America in the 1790s, it was used in a very specific way in reports of French politics as a translation of conservatuer. Only in the mid-1830s did the term begin to be applied to American politics, and only in the 1840s did it really take hold and acquire its generally positive value-laden meaning. By the late 1850s, as the nation's institutions, and indeed its very existence, came under unprecedented threat, "conservative" became a language of legitimation—to claim to be a conservative was to be in favour of protecting something everyone agreed had moral value, such as the legacy of 1776, justice, or the Union.

The timing and circumstances of the emergence of the language of conservatism in American politics has attracted relatively little scholarly attention. Indeed, such is the lingering influence of Hartzian assumptions about the underlying "liberalism" of American political culture that it is still quite frequently assumed that

[4] Quoted in Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), 58.

[5] *Sandusky Register* [Sandusky, OH], June 24, 1858.

there was no "real" conservatism in antebellum America at all.[6] Most of the scholarship on the pre-New Deal history of conservatism takes what might be called a "genealogical" approach. That is, it aims to identify a conservative "tradition" – people whose politics make them conservative according to some normative definition, whether or not they thought of themselves as such. [7] The bulk of this scholarship concentrates, for understandable reasons, on the South, though occasionally some crusty northern Whigs of the Rufus Choate variety are also thrown in.[8] At the same time, the term "conservative" is also deployed by historians of

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[6] Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955). Influential studies of the American conservative tradition by Russell Kirk and Clinton Rossiter both treated the antebellum and Civil War eras as a low-point in which the only authentic conservatism existed in the South. See, Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (London: Faber, 1954)*;* Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion* (New York: Random House, 1955).

[7] Recent examples of scholarship that creates a genealogy of conservatism include: Patrick Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Charles W. Dunn and J. David Woodward, *The Conservative Tradition in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. Rev. edn 2003). "Tradition" is often used in this literature as a fairly lose and less conceptually-fraught alternative to "ideology."

[8] On antebellum Southern conservatism, see, Eugene Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Dickson D. Bruce Jr. *The Rhetoric of Conservatism: The Virginia Convention of 1829-30 and the Conservative Tradition in the South* (San Marino, CA: Huntingdon Library, 1982); Masahiro Nakamura, *Visions of Order in William Gilmore Simms: Southern Conservatism and the Other American Romance* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009); Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life in the American South, 1810-1860.* 2 vols. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), esp. vol. 2,

antebellum politics to describe the politics of anyone who defended slavery. The implication is that the antebellum anti-slavery to proslavery political spectrum can be described using a radical-conservative vocabulary.[9] Of course, it makes intuitive sense to use the shorthand "conservative" to describe the politics of people who (albeit with differing degrees of commitment) resisted attempts to bring slavery to an end. But we should be clear when we do this that we are imposing our own categories and not reflecting the terminological usage of the time. Before the Civil War the term "conservative" was used as a self-description by a far wider cast of characters than those who today's historians typically wish to label in that way. Specifically,

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820-836; O'Brien, "Conservative Thought in the Old South: A Review Article," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 14 (July 1992): 566-76; Adam L. Tate, *Conservatism and Southern Intellectuals 1789-1861: Liberty, Tradition and the Good Society* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005).

[9] For exceptions, see Joshua A. Lynn, *Preserving the White Man's Republic: Jacksonian Democracy, Race and the Transformation of American Conservatism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019); Adam I. P. Smith, *The Stormy Present: Conservatism and the Problem of Slavery in Northern Politics, 1846-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Matthew Mason, *Edward Everett: A Political Biography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), especially ch. 9; Richard N. Current, *Daniel Webster and the Rise of National Conservatism* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955); Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 17898-1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Peter Knupfer, *The Union As It Is: Constitutional Unionism and Sectional Compromise, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); John Higham, *From Boundlessness to Consolidation: The Transformation of American Culture, 1848-1860* (Ann Arbor, MI: William L. Clements Library, 1969); Patrick Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

Americans certainly did not apply the term "conservative" exclusively to those who defended slavery; on the contrary, some of slavery's strongest opponents strenuously sought to present themselves as conservative while denigrating their proslavery antagonists for their radicalism. Moreover, "conservative" was rarely, unlike today, a singular political identity; relatively few nineteenth-century Americans would have opted to describe themselves exclusively as a conservative even while many, if not most, would wish to be seen as subscribing to conservative positions. In short, conservative was more often an adjective than a noun.

This essay is an effort to identify how, when and why "conservatism" first came to be part of the language of politics in the United States. Because there is already a great deal of writing on the worldview of southern slaveholders, my focus is on those outside the South who gravitated towards this language, and my approach is to try to reconstruct precisely what people meant when they described themselves and others, or when they talked about particular political positions, as "conservative."

Political historians have always paid attention to the use of language in understanding the worldview of people in the past, of course, but in recent decades this approach has been invigorated by both theoretical and technological developments: even as scholars have become more aware of how words can constitute political reality, the availability of digital word searches in vast databases has enabled us to conduct far more precise analyses on a far greater scale than was previously possible. Quentin Skinner's most far-reaching influence on historical practice has been to make scholars more self-consciously reflective about the context in which a text is created. [10] It is not only the writing of political elites or self-conscious theorists

[10] Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). See especially pp. 103–27.

that matter, but the appearance of particular terms in "everyday" use. It is for this reason that, for our period, newspapers are an especially interesting source. The thousand or so daily and weekly papers produced in 1840 grew to more than four thousand by 1860, with presses churning out an estimated 923 million copies annually.[11] All were an interface between a core group of self-consciously professional political actors (which newspaper editors invariably were) and a wider literate public whose engagement in public affairs was less systematic even if it was sometimes intense. In the case of so ubiquitous and apparently meaningful a term as "conservative," elucidating its meanings from its everyday context can help us discern the frameworks in which political choices were made and the limits of the politically possible defined.

In a sense, my approach here is to interrogate "conservative" as one of those malleable "key words" which offer a way of measuring the continuities and transformations of American politics.[12] However it must be said that, even compared to other "key words," conservatism is more than usually slippery. It is a more obviously a *relative* term than most other key words—one is always both *more and less* conservative than other people. In today's polarized politics, "conservatism" at

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[11] S. N. D. North, *History and Present Conditions of the Newspaper and Periodical Press of the United States* (Washington: General Printing Office, 1880), 187; Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States through 250 years, 1690 to 1940* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 329-59.

[12] Daniel T. Rodgers *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics since Independence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Roderick P. Hart, Sharon E. Jarvis, William P. Jennings & Deborah Smith-Howell, *Political Keywords: Using Language That Uses Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

least has an inseparable antonym in "liberal" but in nineteenth-century America such a juxtaposition makes no sense; if anything, "liberal" (a rarer term with much less "everyday" political meaning) was closely related to "conservative": both were used to characterize a measured, "common sense" approach to politics.

It is also the case that, to a greater extent than, for example, "democrat" or "republican," conservatism had—and still has—emotional and psychological connotations. There is a substantial body of scholarship, generated both by political scientists and psychologists which conceptualizes conservatism as the political manifestation of uncertainty, anxiety, intolerance of ambiguity or the need for structure and order.[13] It is probably true that anxiety about change—its nature and pace—was at the heart of why the language of conservatism was so powerful in the nineteenth century. But in itself a tendency towards anxiety about change is an insufficient basis for describing or understanding what "conservative" meant since most American voters—and non-voters too—were anxious about some change to some degree, and virtually no one (not even the most hidebound "conservative") was against any change at all.

European Origins

[13] The classic statement of this view is Theodor W. Adorno et al, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950). Some recent neuropsychological research provides some evidence for this view. See, for example, Jost, John T. and Orsolya Hunyady, "Antecedents and consequences of system-justifying ideologies," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 14: 5 (2005): 260-65; Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012).

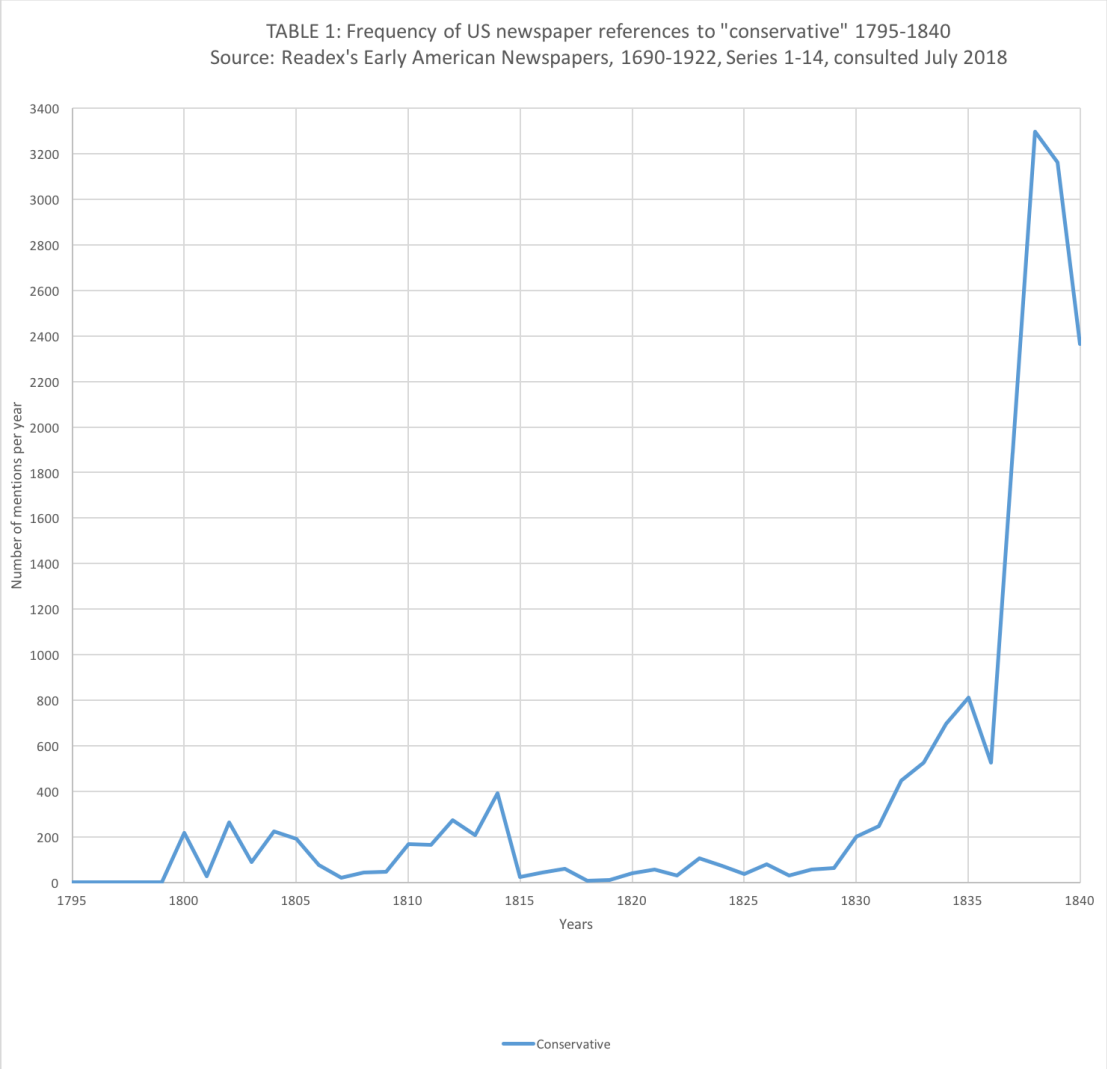

Table 1 charts the instances in which the word “conservative” appears in the newspapers included in the Readex Corporation’s database “Early American Newspapers, 1690-1922” between 1790 and 1840. (In these decades there were virtually no instances of the use of “conservatism” and only scattered use of other associated words like “conservator” or “conservationist” and before 1790 there were virtually no instances of “conservative.”) The database does not claim to be comprehensive, but it is the largest currently available. And while the optical character recognition technology that underpins word searches on these kinds of digital databases is not infallible, it is reliable enough for us to be confident about the

general trends. (The increase in the number of newspapers over the years means that ideally one would index the occurrence of key words against the total number of words printed, but the denominator in such an exercise would be difficult if not impossible to determine. The purpose of the exercise is simply to illustrate a pattern.)

What the data shows is that the word "conservative" first appeared in the late 1790s, not coincidentally about three years after the sudden appearance of "democrat": both were terms imported from France, but while "democrat" quickly came to be applied to American politics, "conservative" did not, at least initially. As Matthew Rainbow Hale has shown, the radical turn of the French Revolution in the 1790s dramatically reoriented post-revolutionary politics in America, introducing a new binary between the "people" and "aristocrats," intensifying a seemingly very real fear of subversion and counter-revolution, and retrospectively recasting the rebellion against British authority as "democratic."[14] According to Peter Onuf, it was developments in France that led Thomas Jefferson to fuse the concept of "democracy" with "republic" and his supporters "to think of their opposition to the Washington and Adams administrations as a 'democratic' challenge to 'aristocracy,' radically simplifying an extraordinarily complicated landscape."[15] The word "democratic" was

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[14] Matthew Rainbow Hale, "Regenerating the World: The French Revolution, Civic Festivals, and the Forging of Modern American Democracy, 1793–1795," *Journal of American History* 103:4 (March 2017): 891–920.

[15] Peter S. Onuf, "Thomas Jefferson and American Democracy," in *Seeing Jefferson Anew: In His Time and Ours,* ed. John B. Boles and Randal L. Hall (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 30. For the aristocracy/democracy antithesis, see Mark Philp, "Talking about Democracy: Britain in the 1790s," in *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions,* ed. Innes and Philp, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 113. On the emergence of democracy as a language in the United States, see R. R. Palmer, "Notes on the Use of the Word

so enthusiastically embraced by Jeffersonians that its French origins soon faded from view, and by the time of Alexis de Tocqueville's visit it had become indelibly associated—for better or for worse—with US political institutions and culture. In contrast, the increased use of "conservative" in American newspapers before 1815 remained almost entirely restricted to discussions of French—and to a lesser extent—broader European politics. Following the usage in British newspapers the term "conservative" appeared almost exclusively in a very precise context: as the neutral English translation of le sénat conservateur, the powerful body established in 1798 following Napoleon Bonaparte's coup d'etat of 18 Brumaire with the specific remit of preserving the Constitution. In the few instances in which "conservative" appeared in a discussion of American politics it was quite narrowly applied to the government's capacity to preserve itself. For example, in 1817 the Philadelphia *Aurora* referred to "the conservative power vested in the [Federal] government"—a usage that appears to

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'Democracy,' 1789–1799," *Political Science Quarterly,* 68 (June 1953), 203–26; Seth Cotlar, *Tom Paine's America: The Rise and Fall of Transatlantic Radicalism in the Early Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); Seth Cotlar, "Languages of Democracy in America from the Revolution to the Election of 1800," in *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions*, 13–27; Adam I. P. Smith, "The 'Fortunate Banner': Languages of Democracy in the United States, *c*. 1848," *ibid.*, 28–39; Andrew Shankman, *Crucible of American Democracy: The Struggle to Fuse Egalitarianism and Capitalism in Jeffersonian Pennsylvania* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004); Armin Mattes, *Citizens of a Common Intellectual Homeland: The Transatlantic Origins of American Democracy and Nationhood* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015); Allan Kulikoff, "Revolutionary Violence and the Origins of American Democracy," *Journal of the Historical Society,* 2 (Spring 2002), 229–60; and Andrew W. Robertson, *The Language of Democracy: Political Rhetoric in the United States and Britain, 1790–1900* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995).

be a fairly direct application of the term from Napoleon's "conservative senate."[16] Retrospectively, scholars have associated the word "conservative" with Federalists who feared the importation of Jacobinism into America, but it was not a term that much used as a self-description by such people at the time. Very occasionally Jeffersonians coupled "conservative" with "aristocratic" when attacking their Federalist opponents but there is no evidence that it was a term with any popular purchase.[17]

As Table 1 shows, the use of "conservative" declined for a decade and a half after Napoleon's defeat. When it returned it was again in relation to foreign politics, though this time Britain was the focus. The parliamentary and extra-parliamentary fight over the Great Reform Act of 1832, which expanded the franchise and eliminated some of the corruptions and monopolies of the old system, was followed with intense interest in the US press. British usage—often simply reprinted columns from the London papers—broadened the meaning of the term considerably. For the first time, "conservative" was applied to political formations and social groups, and to an individual's temperament or "disposition" rather than to the function of institutions.

Critically, it was in the context of the discussion of the battle for parliamentary reform in Britain that a distinction emerged between "true conservatism" and reaction. After the passage of the 1832 Reform Act, Sir Robert Peel's Conservative Party subtly distanced itself from old "stand-patter" Toryism and began the process of positioning itself as the party of "common sense" and patriotism which was to later

[16] *Weekly Aurora* [Philadelphia], July 21, 1817.

[17] Rachel Hope Cleves, *The Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

bear fruit under Benjamin Disraeli.[18] Influenced by the usage of the British press, columns of which were reprinted in US newspapers, "conservative" began to be used as much to distinguish a position from reaction as from radicalism or revolution. The reactionaries in Britain and the United States, explained one newspaper editor in 1831, were the men who, "by resisting Reform of every description," would prove to be more destructive than the radicals they opposed. A conservative position, in contrast, was one that would maintain "timeless verities" by moving with the times and that without "moderate, reasonable, conservative Reform" there would be "revolution" in Britain.[19] From this premise, a self-consciously "conservative" theory of political change emerged that was to become enormously influential for the rest of the nineteenth century both in Britain and in the United States: the notion that reactionary politics provoked destructive revolution. In an era of rapid social and technological change, the "conservative" quest to marry stability with progress could be accomplished only through a judicious embrace of "reform." It followed that the "true conservative" was one who adopted a moderate progressive position between the extremes of Jacobinism and reaction.

This conception of the ideal path of political development, respecting the past but welcoming innovation when it was "just" and "right," represented a direct challenge to the dominant Jacksonian understanding of politics as a binary struggle

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[18] Recent scholarship has emphasised the popular appeal of conservatism and the Conservative Party even as early as the 1830s and 40s. See, Matthew Roberts, "Popular Conservatism in Britain, 1832-1914," *Parliamentary History* 26, no. 3 (2007): 387-410; Felix Driver, "Tory-Radicalism? Ideology, Strategy and Popular Politics during the Eighteen-Thirties," *Northern History,* XXVII (1991), 120-38.

[19] *National Gazette* [Philadelphia], April 14, 1831; New York *Evening Post,* March 4, 1831.

between aristocracy and democracy.[20] The rising use of "conservative" during the 1830s as shown in Table 1 thus reflects its use in both positive and negative ways. For Jacksonians it was a new synonym for the reactionary forces against which their movement constantly battled. But for anti-Jacksonians—and this was by far the most common usage—the term "conservative" was increasingly embraced as the antithesis of a dangerous Jacobinism which threatened to undermine the careful design, the balance of powers and the "genius of moderation" of the Framers. At stake was no less than the survival of the republic in the face of the "mob." As one Whig newspaper summed up this new embrace of the term: "One must either be 'conservative' or destructive."[21]

For a brief period between 1837 and 1840 the term "Conservative" (capitalised) referred almost invariably to the faction of Democrats who opposed

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[20] For major interpretations of Jacksonian Democracy, see Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief,* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957); Lawrence Frederick Kohl, *The Politics of Individualism: Parties and the American Character in the Jacksonian Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); John Ashworth, *"Agrarians" and "Aristocrats": Party Political Ideology in the United States, 1837-1846,* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1983); Jean H. Baker, *Political Culture of Northern Democrats: The Political Culture of the Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Sean Wilentz, "Jeffersonian Democracy and the Origins of Political Antislavery in the United States: The Missouri Crisis Revisited," *Journal of the Historical Society,* 4: 3 (2004): 375–401; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Jonathan Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[21] *Madisonian* [Washington, DC], Oct 31, 1837.

President Martin Van Buren's Sub-Treasury plan. "A *Conservative,* in the literal meaning of the word," explained a New York Jacksonian newspaper in 1838, "is a politician who has abandoned the democratic party, and taking new ground with his new federal and bank associates, attempts to create division and alienation in the Democratic ranks by false and deceptive views of this question."[22] As the Washington *Madisonian* crowed after a victory in the New York state elections of 1838, "Conservatism… has inflicted a wound on the locofoco 'sun' of New York… too deep to be easily healed or forgotten."[23]

Beyond this specific factional meaning, something important happened to the term "conservative" in the polarised political environment of the 1830s: not only did it enter the bloodstream of American politics for the first time, it served as a way for anti-Jacksonians to assert their own claim to be the true inheritors and protectors of the American Revolution. A conservative position became one that would preserve the republic against the challenge of Jacobinism in its "locofoco" American guise.

Conservatism and the Whig-Democratic Party System

[22] *Auburn Journal and Advertiser* [Auburn, NY], Sept 12, 1838.

[23] *Madisonian* [Washington, DC], Nov 14, 1838.

TABLE 2: Frequency of "conservative" and "conservatism" in US newspapers, 1840-1860
Source: Readex's Early American Newspapers, 1690-1922, Series 1-14, consulted July 2018

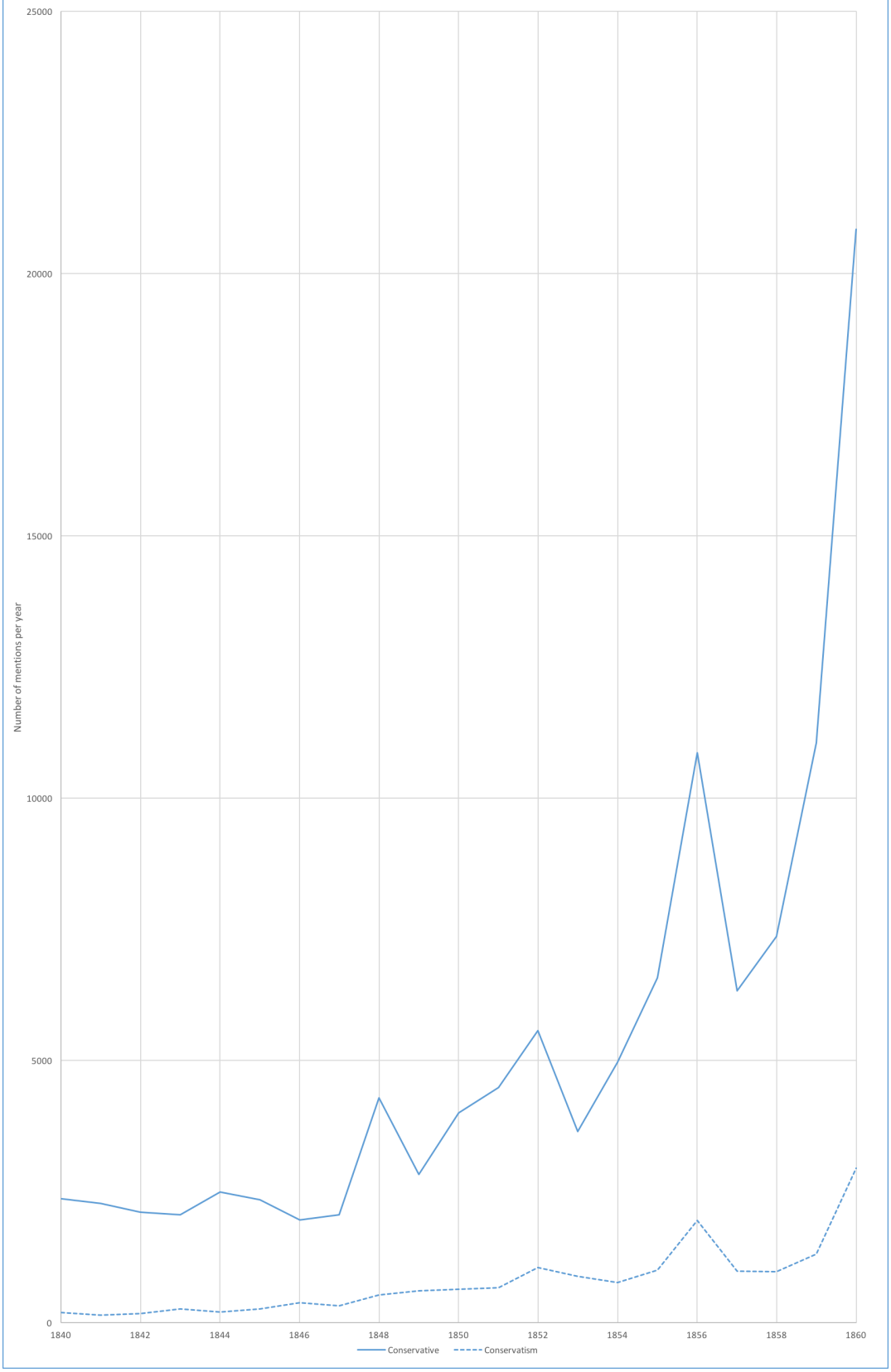

Table 2 shows the frequency with which "conservative" and the related term "conservatism" appeared in the American press between 1840 and 1860. It indicates that the rise of the late 30s continued through the early- to mid-1840s before spiking in 1848, the year of revolutions in Europe and a bitterly contested presidential contest in America.

Following the usage of radicals in Britain, for whom conservatism meant the reactionary politics of the landed interest, Jacksonians in America occasionally used it to capture everything they were struggling against. A writer in the *Brooklyn Evening Star* in 1843 explained that there were two timeless, "unchanging" parties—on the one hand, the "movement" party "from its disposition to advance", and on the other the "conservative party" from its disposition to "stand still."[24] For one Democratic editor in the Wisconsin Territory in 1847 "conservatism" meant the faction that had "in all times and all places" been opposed to the people because "it has no trust in man, no faith in his destiny."[25] The policy that had driven the actions of the British government before the Revolution explained another Democratic editor was "conservatism"—not a word that was ever used at the time, but which, in retrospect, served as the essence of the anti-democratic spirit, not least because it was a way of associating partisan enemies with the worst excesses of George III's ministers.

The prominence of "conservative" and "conservatism" in the 1840s was mainly due not to the attacks of Democrats, however, but its adoption by their opponents, now known as Whigs. The term "Whig" was a conscious appeal to a British political tradition of opposition to centralised power, an echo of American

[24] *Brooklyn Evening Star,* July 19, 1843

[25] *Wisconsin Democrat* [Green Bay], Feb 20, 1847.

revolutionary use that pre-dated the Jeffersonian embrace of French revolutionary terminology and the still-pervasive democrat/aristocrat dichotomy. To say one was a "Whig" was implicitly to reject the "abstractions" of French revolutionary "theory." The term "conservative" was the new way of describing the values of this political movement which saw itself just as strongly as the protector of what they regarded as the Founders' legacy, just as did Democrats. In 1845, a Whig newspaper in Brooklyn defined "conservatism" as, in effect, the essence of Whigs' conception of their political role—as a "union" of "reasonable men, meeting in a spirit of compromise… to promote harmony."[26] A Whig speaker in Georgia in 1847 said Whig principles were embodied in one word, "and that word [was] CONSERVATISM." He went on to sketch out a history of the United States in which "conservatism…formed our Constitution, and [has] preserved us as a people."[27] The effect was to dramatize the difference between the "measured" and "improving" spirit of the American Revolution and the "excesses" of the French. Washington, Adams, Madison and Monroe (but not, unsurprisingly, Jefferson) were hailed by Whigs as "genuine statesmen, [who] did not blindly adore either the old or the new, but endeavoured to preserve the former, and to found upon at whatever the latter offered of amelioration."[28]

Some Jacksonians saw their opponents' embrace of the "conservative" label as a flimsy "cloak," a "disguise," or a "false name" under which they could promulgate the "discredited doctrine of federalism."[29] Call it "federalism, conservatism,

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[26] *Brooklyn Evening Star*, Nov 7, 1845.

[27] *Independent Monitor* [Tuscaloosa, AL], Oct 12, 1847.

[28] *Ohio State Journal* [Columbus], Oct 11, 1848.

[29] *Weekly Mississippian* [Jackson], Dec 13, 1839; *Richmond Enquirer,* May 21, 1839; *National Gazette* [Philadelphia], Aug 20, 1838.

whiggery, or what you will," warned one Jacksonian editor, this was a political movement "still at enmity with the spirit of our institutions, seeks to assimilate them to the much lauded political fabric of England and is nothing but unchanged toryism still."[30] By "conservative," protested another Jacksonian editor, the Whigs did not mean they were "conservative of our political institutions, of the principle of equal rights which forms their basis, and of the great objects of their founders"—for those things, of course, was what the Jacksonian movement aimed to conserve.[31]

This was a back-handed recognition of the political purchase of "conservatism" and it paved the way for Democrats, in time, to claim the "conservative" mantle for themselves. By 1840 a familiar theme of Democratic political rhetoric was to castigate the "hypocrisy" of their opponents' claim to "conservatism" given their alliance with dangerous radicals of whom the Democrats did not approve—the radical supporters of the rights of women, Native Americans, and, especially, African Americans.[32] "There is not one political faction or social heresy, however depraved or dangerous of which the Whigs (under the banner of conservatism) don't seek amalgamation," warned a Democratic editor in Washington. And, predictably, "of these factions the abolitionists are the most desperate, numerous and formidable" and therefore, in "disguising" themselves behind "the beauties" of conservativism, Whigs "prostitute a sacred name to the basest uses of faction!"[33]

At the root of the Democrat-Whig partisan division in the 1840s were disagreements about the nature of power and authority in the republic. Democrats

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[30] *Detroit Free Press*, July 19, 1839.

[31] New York *Evening Post,* Jan 22, 1840.

[32] See, for example, *Democrat* [Huntsville, AL], Nov 30, 1839; *Democratic Free Press* [Detroit, MI], Feb 27, 1839.

[33] *The Washington Union*, Nov 2, 1846.

tended to invoke the idea of a singular "people" in whom political wisdom resided while Whigs, with their more measured, sceptical view of politics and human nature, emphasized the need for a moderating check if the republic was to avoid declension into anarchy or despotism. On occasion, this led to alignments that were very similar to those in Britain in which one party defended existing privilege and the other called for radical institutional reform. For example, the constitutional conflict in Rhode Island sometimes known as the "Dorr War" exposed sharp differences between Whigs and Democrats about whether popular sovereignty meant, in the end, the "unfettered" right of the people to exert power, or whether that right had to be exercised through established institutions. Democratic editors proclaimed Thomas W. Dorr a martyr of popular sovereignty while the Whig leader Henry Clay warned that the leader of the democratic forces in Rhode Island represented a "dangerous spirit of disorganization, and disregard of law" that the "Democratic Party, as it calls itself" typified.[34]

In highly charged situations like that in Rhode Island, Democrats contrasted "radicalism" and "natural rights"—which were morally worthy—with elitist

[34] *Democratic Review* quoted in Christian G. Fritz, *American Sovereigns: The People and America's Constitutional Tradition Before the Civil War,* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 266; Henry Clay, *Speech of Henry Clay, delivered at the Great Barbeque at Lexington, (Kentucky), June 9, 1842* (Sing Sing, NY: E. G. Sutherland, 1842), 16. On the Dorr "rebellion", see Marvin E. Gettleman, *The Dorr Rebellion: A Study in American Radicalism, 1833-1849* (New York: Random House, 1973); George M. Dennison, *The Dorr War: Republicanism on Trial, 1831-1861* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976); William Wiecek, "Popular Sovereignty in the Dorr War: Conservative Counterblast," *Rhode Island History,* 32 (1973): 35-51; Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 539-45.

"conservatism."[35] But although Democrats in the 1840s still sometimes invoked "conservatism" in this way as the label for the philosophical opposition to democracy, their own constitutional conservatism was increasingly brought to the fore. The seemingly straightforward battle in Rhode Island between propertied privilege and democratic rights (for white men) was striking precisely because it was relatively unusual. In general, Democrats—unlike radicals in Britain, for example—were not the outsiders but the defenders of the existing constitutional order. Democrats were therefore increasingly unwilling to concede the "conservative" mantle to their opponents. Observing this phenomenon, the Transcendentalist philosopher and soon-to-be Catholic convert Orestes Brownson argued in the *Democratic Review* that the "movement party, that is the party of progress" was divided in two—those who sought progress through "destruction" and "the conservatives seeking progress through and in obedience to existing institutions."[36]

Ironically mirroring their opponents' anxiety about "Jacobinical" radicalism, Democrats worried that the "fanaticism" of abolitionists would "ride rough shod over all the guaranties of the constitution." The Whig Party, which with a "sanctimonious air prates about its intelligence and virtue, and love of law and order" were all the time in "unholy alliance" with the most "destructive" radicals.[37] Democrats from Jefferson onwards conceptualised themselves as the only legitimate embodiment of the people and therefore it was their responsibility to maintain the Union and its precious revolutionary legacy. This was, in the end, an obviously conservative

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[35] *New Bedford Register* [New Bedford, MA], July 13, 1842.

[36] [Orestes Brownson], "Democracy and Liberty," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (April 1843), 385.

[37] *Detroit Free Press*, Dec 9, 1846.

position and so it was probably inevitable that when Democrats—North and South—saw antislavery "agitation" as the prime danger to the Union, they would begin to appropriate for themselves the language of conservatism.

Therefore, both of the broad political traditions of Whiggery and Democracy as they played out in the 1840s can reasonably be said to have contained self-consciously "conservative" elements and both saw political value in the term, which is perhaps why its meaning has proven so hard to pin down. Undoubtedly Whigs were more likely to define themselves through the language of conservatism while Democrats still occasionally used it as a term of opprobrium. But even then, Democrats recognised that—unlike "aristocrat", which in the end had meaning only if it applied to a small, presumably privileged elite—"conservatism" was an impulse to which anyone might succumb. A Pittsburgh Democrat told an audience in 1847 that to the "conservatism of self-interest" that explained the allegedly anti-democratic stance of the "aristocracy," we should add the "conservatism of timidity" to which "all men" were susceptible, but which, it argued, was no less a threat to the spirit of innovation and progress.[38]

And so, through the 1840s, "conservatism" became more and more clearly a language of legitimation—which is to say that although its meaning was not stable, it was an adjective that conferred a blessing on an idea or a person. It was an ethical claim about the nature and validity of a political posture. A "conservative measure" or a "conservative principle" was one that should by definition be supported—often also described as sturdy, sound, principled, reasoned, manly, or honest. "Conservatism"

[38] *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, Nov 25, 1847.

was "the make-weight in times of extreme outbursts of passion or popular excitement," a "disposition to preserve, rather than to destroy."[39]

The 1840s also saw a spate of lectures, editorial articles, and sermons musing on the proper balance between "conservatism" and "radicalism." These musings assumed that both impulses were naturally present both in each individual and in society at large. The "opposing elements of human nature," explained a Wisconsin editor, were "radicalism and conservatism" and both are "essential" and "linked." After all, even the radical becomes a "conservative" when he has "gained his point."[40] The sensationally popular evangelist Henry Ward Beecher had a stock lecture on the subject of the need to unite progressivism and conservatism in human hearts as well as in the polity. Distinguishing "true conservatism" from "false" was a game that Democrats could play just as well as Whigs. "True conservatism" declared a Democratic editor is the "bold spirit which leads into the car of progress, and seizing upon the reins directs its movements with a firm hand," while the Whig Party, claimed a supporter, was "in all things essentially conservative, and at the same time [it] is the real party of progress and improvement."[41]

The alleged *naturalness* of conservatism was one of its most distinctive characteristics as a concept in antebellum America. "Conservatism" was what was left when "theories" and "fanaticism" were stripped away. Speakers referred to "just and natural…conservative feelings" and referred to the "natural sentiments of patriotism, family affection…reverence for truth, age, valor and wisdom" as the "conservative

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[39] *Daily Illinois State Journal* [Springfield], September 1, 1856; *Portland Weekly Advertiser* [Portland, ME], Feb 7 1843.

[40] *Oshkosh Democrat* [Oshkosh, WI], May 31, 1850.

[41] *Cayuga Chief* [Auburn, NY], Oct 4, 1853; *American Whig Review* 1 (January 1845): 1.

principle of society."[42] The dominant association of conservatism when it emerged in the mid-nineteenth century was therefore the antithesis of "fanaticism" and "destructiveness." It was the default condition of "fair-minded" men; the "common-sense" philosophy of the everyday.

This particular understanding of a "conservative" political disposition was no doubt bolstered by the phenomenal influence in America of Edmund Burke. Admired by both Democrats and Whigs as a rhetorician, the eighteenth-century British philosopher-politician was at the peak of his posthumous fame in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the perorations to his speeches learned by rote in schoolrooms and quoted in Congress. Admiring parents even named their children in his honor (an example being the Edmund Burke who served as a Democratic congressman from New Hampshire). Burke was later reinvented by Russel Kirk, William F. Buckley and other twentieth century conservatives as the "father of modern conservatism," but in the nineteenth century he was a far more complex and interesting figure. Primarily he was celebrated in the US for his support from the House of Commons of the American revolutionary cause, a position he took because of his commitment to Whig principles of limited government and individual liberty. In contrast to the infidel Jacobin Thomas Paine, Burke reassured Americans that their revolution was of a profoundly different character from the French. For Burke, the great art of politics was to find the right balance between freedom and institutional

[42] *Daily Cleveland Herald,* July 13, 1853; *Boston Evening Transcript,* Nov 10, 1856.

stability, an objective that summed up a "conservative" position in the American republic which already benefited from the blessings of a free constitution.[43]

In the twenty-first century, "conservatism" in America is typically assumed to be an "ideology," implying that believers subscribe to a coherent set of fundamental, core principles that circumscribe a range of possible responses to any political situation.[44] In the broadest sense, nineteenth-century conservatives may be said to share a skeptical vision of politics that may amount to an "ideology," depending on how one defines that most elusive of social science concepts. It is probably more helpful, however, to see nineteenth-century conservatism in its own light as almost by definition *anti*-ideological, where ideology is a synonym for "dogma"—or, to use a nineteenth-century phrase "one-ideaism." For example, Ezekiel Bacon, a Whiggish Presbyterian minister told a meeting of a Young Men's Lyceum in upstate New York in 1843 that the greatest challenge to the stability of the Union came "when an ardent, self-opinionated, perhaps ambitious man has strongly imbibed *one idea*, or enlisted himself to effect *one* particular *object*." Such a man, Bacon warned, then tended to

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[43] See Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of the North Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 53-54, 181-182; Howe, *Political Culture of the American Whigs,* 235-7; Drew Macaig, *Edmund Burke in America: The Contested Career of the Father of Modern Conservatism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Michael D. Clark, *Coherent Variety: The Idea of Diversity in British and American Conservative Thought* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 119-120. The reputation of Burke in the nineteenth-century US closely parallels his reputation in Britain as analysed in Emily Jones, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830-1914: An Intellectual History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[44] This minimalist definition of ideology draws on the very sensible conclusions offered by John Gerring. See Gerring, "Ideology: A Definitional Analysis," *Political Research Quarterly* 50: 4 (Dec 1997): 957-994.

"think and act as though he believed *that* the only one in the world worthy of pursuit" and would say to others who disagreed "like the Pharisee of old, 'stand you by, I am holier than thou.'"[45] This distaste for ideological politics reminds one of the philosopher Michael Oakeshott's famous conception of a conservative as one who prefers "the actual to the possible… the near to the distant… the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss."[46] This type of conservative "disposition" (to use Oakeshott's term) is not hard to discern as an element of the political culture of antebellum America. Yet unlike Oakeshott's ideal conservative, most mid-nineteenth century Americans who positively identified with that term still believed in the ideal of a polity always on the path to perfection, even while they opposed "one-ideaism" on the grounds that it was both impractical and destabilising. In Orestes Brownson's terms, then, most American conservatives remained of the "movement party."

Conservatism and the Crisis of the Union

The anxieties many mid-nineteenth century Americans expressed about the fragility of institutions and the threat of radical, alien ideologies were greatly intensified by the European Revolutions in what Herman Melville called the "red year

[45] Ezekiel Bacon, *Recollections of Fifty Years Since, with glances at the present aspects and future prospects of the age and times* (Utica, NY: R. W. Roberts, 1843), 27.

[46] Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen,1962), 169.

Forty-Eight."[47] The rise in the use of "conservatism" in 1848 shown in Table 2 was due, as in the pre-1815 period, to intense coverage in the American press of dramatic events in Europe. But whereas in the aftermath of the first French Revolution the term "conservative" was almost exclusively used to describe foreign factions and institutions, in 1848 it was a concept so embedded as an element in many Americans' conception of themselves that it could be invoked as a point of comparison with the un-anchored radicalism of European revolutionary movements.[48] While most Americans of all parties initially welcomed the uprisings in Europe as evidence of the spread of republican ideas, their failure to smoothly transform old monarchies into constitutional republics seemed, especially to Whiggish types, only to highlight the profound differences between the American Revolution and all others. As a leading Whig newspaper opined, France needed "a [George] Washington" since "the blessings of freedom" could only be enjoyed with the "conservative influence that springs from general virtue and uncompromising integrity."[49] In a widely reviewed

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[47] Quoted in Larry J. Reynolds, *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance,* (New Haven: Yale, 1988), 100.

[48] On the impact of the 1848 revolution on the United States, see Timothy M. Roberts, *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009); Donald S. Spencer, *Louis Kossuth and Young America: A Study of Sectionalism and Foreign Policy, 1848-1852* (Columbia, MO: Missouri University Press, 1977); Bruce Levine, *Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict and the Coming of the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Mischa Honeck, *We Are the Revolutionists: German-Speaking Immigrants and American Abolitionists after 1848* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).; André M. Fleche, *The Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Smith, *The Stormy Present,* ch. 1.

[49] *North American and United States Gazette* [Philadelphia], April 6, 1848.

book published in 1854, a Boston lawyer, George Ticknor Curtis, elaborated the idea that the American Revolution was an entirely different sort of revolution from any other because it had not been an attempt to start the world anew (a claim that would have surprised Thomas Paine and pleased Burke) but the logical culmination of a long tradition of Anglo-Saxon liberty. While the revolution in America had been a "preserving" revolution, revolutions elsewhere tended merely to be "destructive."[50]

One consequence of the 1848 Revolutions, then, was to reinforce a self-consciously "conservative" attempt to define American republicanism by its capacity to combine liberty and stability, to embed popular sovereignty in duly constituted institutions. In the face of riots in the big cities and unprecedented levels of immigration from continental Europe, it seemed to many Americans at mid-century that it was never more important that passions be constrained and Protestant values provide the "conservative" element that would bind an apparently fissiparous society together. The Philadelphia *Inquirer* issued a typical warning in 1851 about "the wild and impracticable theories of socialism, which are inculcated at the present time by the visionaries, the ultras, and the enthusiasts of the Old World." Such "heresies and delusions," transplanted "to our own soil" would "sooner or later" lead to "rapine, bloodshed, and civil war."[51]

But if this kind of language from Whigs seemed to indicate a return to the sternest anti-Jacobin language of the 1790s, it was accompanied by something quite new: a wholehearted embrace of the language of "democracy" as well as of

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[50] George Ticknor Curtis, *History of the origin, formation, and adoption of the Constitution of the United States, with notices of its principal framers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1854).

[51] *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov 26, 1851.

"conservatism." 1848 was the year that, in America, conservatism and democracy came to seem mutually reinforcing. It was "the *conservatism* of the great public that has saved it from social anarchy," argued one Whiggish religious journal; "the mass of the people are generally more conservative than their rulers," explained another.[52] It was precisely the *democratic* nature of American society that made its people a conservative force. Unlike in Europe, the masses had no need of revolution, little susceptibility to radical ideologies, much less chance of being swayed by unscrupulous demagogues or corralled into a mob. Alongside religion and patriotism, widespread literacy was one factor that underpinned this faith in popular conservatism. As one Vermont newspaper argued in 1850, "printing has placed the means of instruction within the reach of the great mass of the people, and has made them substantially the [conservative] order in every civilized community."[53] If in Europe the "aristocracy" are the "conservative party," in America it was "the people" since here they ruled.[54]

This new confidence in the underlying conservatism of the ordinary people—at least in America, and when properly conditioned by race, religion, and political institutions—was always at play as politics became consumed by the problem of slavery in the 1850s. If in the South "conservatism" meant preservation of the social and racial order, in the North it could also mean preservation of the social order—the unbounded opportunity for white men—against the threat from an "aristocratic" Slave Power.

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[52] *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine,* Feb 19, 1848, 141; *North American and United States Gazette* [Philadelphia], June 30, 1858.

[53] *Semi-Weekly Eagle* [Brattleboro, VT] July 11 1850

[54] *Hartford Times*, June 4, 1856.

The new Republican Party promised a resolution of the threat to the nation posed by slaveholders that was unquestionably radical while at the same time emphasising its "conservative" character. It was a party, explained one editor, "conservative of all that is good, reformative of all that is evil."[55] Castigating the "false" conservatism of the Slave Power—which in reality was promoting a revolutionary new doctrine that slavery should be enforced by national authority—Republicans sought to "*conserve* and perpetuate the original principle on which our republican government is based, that *freedom* is the rule, and *slavery* the exception." This was the "only *true* conservatism" because it proposes to restore the administration of public affairs to the "principles and policy established by the founders of our political system."[56] An upstate New York paper, defending the "new association" that had appeared in 1855, explained that it was the "conservative principle of freedom that…inspires the public heart and assumes the title of Republicanism."[57] Republican leader William H. Seward invoked the term "conservative" repeatedly, calling his party's policy of restricting the expansion of slavery "eminently conservative and constitutional."[58] In a similar vein, *New York Times* editor Henry Raymond—an antislavery Whig turned Republican—explained that by conservatism he meant a policy position that was "hostile to slavery in the abstract, opposed to the extension of slavery, filled with an abiding conviction that the Northern states have been happily rid of it, and that it can never come into the arena of our national politics without…breeding evil passions."[59]

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[55] *Ohio State Journal* [Columbus], June 2, 1858.

[56] *Sandusky Register*, [Sandusky, OH] June 24, 1858.

[57] Buffalo *Morning Express,* Aug 20, 1855.

[58] Baker, ed., *Works of Seward,* 4: 538.

[59] *New York Times,* Dec 22, 1859.

As Matthew Mason explains elsewhere in this volume, a core element of Republican Party campaigns from 1854 to 1860 was indignation that the South had broken "sacred" compacts, beginning with the overthrow of the Missouri Compromise by the Kansas-Nebraska Act.[60] "We tell you that the Missouri Compromise was as sacred as the Constitution itself, and it has been needlessly violated," protested the *Boston Daily Atlas,* a traditionally Whig newspaper. "Now who is the true conservative? He who seeks to rebuild that shattered barrier against the black and bloody sea of slavery, or he who hangs his head, and fold his hands, and waits with oriental submission for his own destruction?"[61] This kind of "conservative" language was by no means the only note struck by Republicans, who were, after all, a highly diverse coalition of different political elements. But leading Republicans played a key role in defining "conservatism" as resistance to the threat from slaveholders to political norms and institutions and ultimately of the nation itself. Early in the Civil War, the point was made vividly by a Massachusetts newspaper using a not-so-subtle analogy:

> A rattlesnake is in your nursery, and trying to dart at your children. Conservatism number one rushes at the reptile; seizes it; if it has lost a fang puts it back in its place; if it has lost any venom, restores it for future emergencies; then shuts the rattlesnake in the closet saying 'go, and sting no more.' Conservatism number two rushes at the rattlesnake, grinds its head beneath its iron heel, and flings it dead from the window.[62]

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[60] On "indignation" and antebellum politics, see also Michael E. Woods, *Emotional and Sectional Conflict in the Antebellum United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), chapter 5.

[61] *Boston Daily Atlas,* August 18, 1855.

[62] *Barre Gazette* [Barre, MA], April 25, 1862.

Republicans embraced "iron-heeled conservatism," as perhaps we might call it, in part in order to neutralise the Democratic attack on them as fanatics. But the spectacular rise in the use of "conservatism" in the latter half of the 1850s shown in Table 2 is a consequence of an unstable political world in which all sides saw advantages to presenting themselves as offering a measured set of solutions that would preserve the virtues and institutions bequeathed by the Founders. The mirror image of many Republicans' insistence on their own essential conservatism was the full-throated embrace of the conservative banner by Democrats. The essence of Jacksonianism was the advocacy and defense of self-government by and for white men. This was now under threat not just from the traditional enemy of "aristocracy" but from a host of "one-idea" reformers. As Joshua A. Lynn has argued "fanaticism replaced Whiggery as Democracy's ideological antithesis, because, like Whiggery before it, fanaticism sought consolidated power to degrade the liberty and equality of self-governing white men."[63] Democrats who had always presented themselves—as their name indicated—as the embodiment of the people, now routinely invoked phrases like the "conservative masses" (and on at least one occasion a proto-Nixonian "conservative but silent majority") who wanted to preserve the Constitution and resist fanaticism.[64] "The Democratic Party has become the great conservative as well as the great progressive party of the country," boasted a Democratic editor in 1858.[65] Accepting his nomination for the presidency, James Buchanan wrote that "this

[63] Lynn, *Preserving the White Man's Republic*, 18.

[64] *Campaign Plain Dealer*, [Cleveland, OH], Oct 27, 1860.

[65] *Pennsylvanian,* Feb 21, 1858.

glorious party now, more than ever, has demonstrated that it is the true conservative party of the Constitution and the Union."[66]

Before the mid-1840s it had been Whiggish conservatives who railed against the impractical "one-idea" reformers. But in the 50s Democrats increasingly defined themselves in opposition to "one-ideaism" as the threats to the democratic constitutional order they celebrated seemed to shift. Democrats argued that if "one-idea-ism" triumphed, "there is nothing for the future of the nation but chaos."[67] The Republicans were the "meddling" party of "one-ideaism" whose opposition to Stephen A. Douglas' "popular sovereignty" for the Territories was because Republicans were simply "Federalists" who did not want the people to be the "judge of their own institutions and local affairs" but wanted to place them under a "congressional despotism—the very essence of old toryism." And slavery was just one aspect of this: "They even go to the extent of proscribing what the people shall eat and drink, and what manner of religion they shall profess."[68] The New York state Democratic party passed resolutions in the spring of 1856 attacking the "unsound" and "revolutionary" claim of the "theorists" of the Republican Party that under no circumstances could Congress admit a slave state.

What we might call the "conservative turn" in the public language of the Democratic Party in the 1850s occurred at the same time as some of their opponents in the North adopted the "iron-heeled conservatism" of proud resistance to the Slave Power. Together these developments ensured that "conservative" was a political descriptor more salient than ever before. Increasingly as the 1850s wore on,

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[66] *New York Herald*, June 10, 1856.

[67] *New York Herald*, May 2, 1860.

[68] *Dover Gazette* [Dover, NH], Feb 18, 1860.

Republicans could be found fiercely attacking the "impudence" of the "self-boasting Democracy" which "prates of its conservatism!"[69] The "word conservative does not exactly square with the Nebraska Bill, the repeal of the conservative compromise measures [or] the extension of slavery," observed a Republican editor sardonically.[70]

Even as both Republicans and Democrats fought to claim the mantle of "conservatism" after 1856 there were repeated plans and hopes laid to resuscitate a "conservative" middle path between the two parties. As the 1860 presidential election approached, some observers were hopeful that a "conservative wave" would crash over the existing party structures.[71] There were some indications that this might happen, such as the triumph, in April 1860, of a "Conservative Union" party in Rhode Island.[72] The new governor, William Sprague, had been nominated by a convention of the "conservative men of Rhode Island," and his supporters presented the contest as a battle between "Conservatism and Radicalism" or between "agitation, anarchy and disunion" and "peace, harmony and the Constitution forever."[73] For the presidential election, the Constitutional Union Party nominated two old "conservative Whigs," John Bell and Edward Everett, and hoped to gain the support of self-conceived "conservatives" including former Democrats who had lost confidence in their old party because of its "peculiar championing of Southern rights."[74] No analysis of the

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[69] [Steubenville, OH] *True American,* March 4, 1857.

[70] Brooklyn *Times Union,* June 17, 1856.

[71] *New York Herald,* May 14, 1860

[72] *New York Herald,* January 16, April 5, 1860.

[73] *Providence Evening Press,* February 16, 22, March 12, April 12, 1860; *Constitution* [Middletown, CT], April 11, 1860; *Weekly Union* [Manchester, NH], April 10, 1860.

[74] *Address of the National Executive Committee of the National Union Party to the People of the United States* (Washington, DC: W. H. Moore, 1860), 6-7.

1860 election is entirely complete if it does not account for the explosion in the use of the language of conservatism in that year. Having observed the phenomenon, however, it is not hard to explain: as the Union teetered on the brink of widely-predicted collapse, there was a premium on appeals to preserve, protect and defend the existing order from whatever seemed the greatest threat: abolitionism, proslavery zealotry, or "fanaticism" in any form.

Conclusion

Entering the US political lexicon in the 1790s from France, "conservative" had a brief career as the antonym of that other French Revolutionary import, "democracy." But in this guise, it never really took off. Radicals, whether labor reformers or women's rights campaigners or abolitionists, continued occasionally to use "conservatism" as a description of their opponents. But, overwhelmingly, "conservatism" was absorbed into American political discourse as an adjective that validated particular positions. Those positions varied considerably: from Yankee clergymen warning young men about the importance of respect for tradition, 1850s Democrats insisting that only a policy of popular sovereignty could preserve the Union against fanatical abolitionists to Whigs anxious about the dangers of mob rule or antislavery campaigners warning about the Slave Power. In a manner that is somewhat analogous to "freedom" or "democracy," "conservatism" became, before the Civil War, one of those "key words" that were invested with rhetorical power and deployed to legitimize or delegitimize particular constructions of the polity. Of course, there was a great deal of strategic positioning in this use of language. But it is

deeply revealing that "conservative" was so prominent a legitemizing term in these decades. Political effort was expended to control the language of conservatism before the Civil War in a way that has not been true in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries.

Conservatism was therefore in most respects a very different entity from what it was to become in the post-New Deal era. It was not a "movement," and not—despite its close association with the Whigs in the 1840s and with the Democrats in the 1850s—a party. Nor did it have any programmatic implications (not even, contrary to its usage by most modern historians of this period, in relation to slavery), although of course in specific contexts it was used to validate particular policy positions. Michael Oakeshott's description of conservatism as a "disposition" comes closest to the term's dominant meaning in these decades: "conservative" implied qualities that were in some sense both personal and political, like moderation, reasonableness or even-handedness. Those most likely to call themselves conservatives saw the term as a way of making claims about their temperament as well as their politics. For example, in defending its position as a "conservative" paper, the *New York Times* explained that its editorials would apply a "cool, unprejudiced judgement to questions as they occur; measure them by a common sense of which indiscriminate radicalism plays no part."[75]

I have emphasized that "conservative" was a slippery term, the partisan, programmatic implications of which were constantly contested. So it was: a case in point is that both opponents and advocates of Maine Laws described their positions as conservative. Opponents spoke up for the "conservative masses" against the "meddlers" while advocates claimed they were "eminently conservative," likening their battle against the evil of liquor to "our revolutionary fathers" who "saw that the

[75] *New York Times,* Oct 15, 1851.

encroachments of the mother country were incompatible with their freedom" and "devised a remedy."[76] Even so, "conservative" invariably implied one thing if nothing else: it was not dogmatic. The Whigs who said they invoked conservatism because they feared "mob rule", and the 1850s Democrats who invoked it as the last redoubt against abolitionist "fanaticism," had this in common. Their rhetorical positioning was as the representatives of ordinary people, of patriots and Christians. To them, "conservative" meant scepticism about abstract reasoning and disdain for excessive emotion in politics. In praising a recently deceased Jacksonian politician, the editor of the New York *Evening Post* acclaimed his "practical statesmanship," his "moderation of temperament" and his "conservative common sense."[77] At about the same time, the editor of a Republican paper in Ohio denounced the Democrats' insults to the "conservative common sense and good feeling" of the people.[78] Conservatism was not an ideology but an anti-ideology: the politics of "common sense."

What does this tell us? "Common sense" in politics is usually another way of describing the values of dominant hierarchies. And it was certainly the case that conservative positions often amounted to a defence of gendered and racial norms, as well as of hierarchies of wealth, against real or imagined attack. Whigs invoked "conservatism" to warn of the threat to property from the mob in urban riots or in the extra-parliamentary violence of the "Dorr War." Democrats embraced "conservative" in the 1850s in order to argue that the power of a majority of white men to regulate society should be unfettered by "one-idea" zealots who wanted to use the power of government to impose abstract notions about what was right.

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[76] [Buffalo, NY] *Advocate,* August 24, 1854.

[77] New York *Evening Post,* July 19, 1857.

[78] [Warren, OH] *Western Reserve Chronicle,* Nov 26, 1856.

Most fundamentally, the rise of the language of conservatism is a reminder of what should, especially in comparative terms, already be obvious to us: that this was a political culture based on a powerful consensual constitutionalism. Conservatism meant defending an idea of freedom, as defined and protected by the Constitution and the Union. White Americans in the pre-Civil War decades had every reason to think that their political institutions were both precious and vulnerable. Voters, being almost all white men, believed that for all the ups and downs of the economic cycle, and for all the inequality they saw around them, they would have more to lose than to gain if the political institutions of the state collapsed. Preservation of their institutions was vital, not least to ensure continued progress—territorial, technological and moral. On that basic question of preservation most Americans concurred, though of course they differed violently in their diagnoses of the dangers and their prescriptions for reform. In short, the history of the political use of "conservatism" reveals the widespread importance of anxieties about decline and subversion. "Conservatism," in its different guises, became a necessary ingredient in a post-revolutionary polity that, while intent on progress and supremely confident of the future, was also anxious about self-preservation—with good reason, as event turned out.

All of which brings us to secession, which for northern conservatives from both Whiggish and Jacksonian traditions, was anathema because in Lincoln's words in his first inaugural it was "the essence of anarchy."[79] As one Pennsylvania Democrat put it during the secession winter, "conservative" men like him were

[79] Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (9 vols: New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955), IV: 267.

surrounded, all of a sudden, by "insanity" on all sides.[80] In the slave states, the biggest obstacle secessionists had to overcome was the perception of that their project was revolutionary; just as the Declaration of Independence had been a hostage to fortune for those who held other human beings in bondage, it was not lost on white southerners that breaking up the Union, especially if it provoked war, was to, say the least, a risky prospect for a slave society. Hence the emphasis in the Confederacy on the continuities with the American Revolution; hence the marginalization of Jefferson with his "glittering generalities" and the sanctification of that eminently conservative Virginia gentlemen George Washington. The Civil War has been cast by some as a clash between a southern conservatism and a northern progressivism, but that was a distinction that made no sense to most Northerners who fought because they believed that only by preserving the Union could progress be assured. "Conservatism" to most Civil War era Americans was by definition good because it connoted the maintenance of their uniquely free institutions not as a relic of a past age but as the living guarantor of the progress, stability and prosperity of their society.

[80] Victor Piollet to William Bigler, Dec 31, 1860, Bigler Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.