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# **The New Conservative Movement**

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## Introduction

This book argues that the most consequential changes in contemporary right-wing politics are not only ideological but infrastructural. “The New Conservative Movement” maps the institutional, media, and grassroots architecture that has enabled recent conservative policy wins and electoral shifts. Rather than adjudicating the merits of policies, it explains the machinery that moves ideas from conception to implementation—how messages are crafted, amplified, and translated into legislation, regulation, and jurisprudence.

At the core of the analysis is a simple proposition: power flows through pipelines. Ideas originate in policy shops and intellectual circles, are stress-tested in conferences and closed-door briefings, packaged by communicators for targeted audiences, and then propelled by media networks and digital platforms. When those ideas achieve sufficient resonance, they become coalitional glue, campaign planks, model bills, executive actions, and, at times, judicial doctrines. Understanding the right today requires seeing this whole-of-movement supply chain and how each link reinforces the others.

Media ecosystems have multiplied the speed and reach of this process. Talk radio, cable news, newsletters, podcasts, and social video form an attention environment where narrative entrepreneurs compete to set the frame. Platform algorithms reward conflict and clarity; influencers translate white papers into shareable stories; fundraising tools convert engagement into resources; and data operations feed messages back to the most persuadable or mobilizable publics. The result is a feedback loop in which messaging and money co-produce momentum.

Organizational strategy has likewise evolved. Legal advocacy groups coordinate litigation that steers doctrine over time. Personnel networks and training pipelines prepare appointees who can implement rule changes within agencies. At the state level, bill-writing shops seed uniform proposals across legislatures, while national committees synchronize calendars, talking points, and voter contact programs. These structures do not merely respond to public opinion; they frequently prefigure and shape it.

None of this happens without grassroots infrastructures. Congregations, local clubs, parent groups, veteran networks, and county parties provide durable venues for socialization, recruitment, and turnout. Culture-war flashpoints—from schooling to historical memory—serve as organizing frames that channel diffuse grievances into concrete political action. The same frames, however, can fracture coalitions if not continually brokered by movement entrepreneurs who arbitrate priorities among

libertarians, evangelicals, national conservatives, and populists.

Methodologically, the book synthesizes organizational analysis, content and network mapping of media flows, case studies of issue campaigns, and close readings of policy memos and legislative texts. The goal is a strategic, not sensational, account—one that treats movement actors as rational within their constraints, attentive to incentives, and adaptive to the opportunities created by technology, philanthropy, and law. Where evidence is contested, the narrative foregrounds mechanisms over personalities and emphasizes traceable pathways from ideas to outcomes.

The chapters that follow are organized to mirror the movement's pipeline. Early chapters frame the ideological and electoral reconfiguration; the middle chapters examine media infrastructures, donors, legal networks, and statehouse strategies; later chapters trace specific policy domains and narrative frames; and the closing chapters assess coalition management, democratic implications, and future scenarios. Readers should come away with a toolbox: a vocabulary for mapping influence, a template for tracing policy diffusion, and a set of diagnostic questions for evaluating strategic capacity.

This is a descriptive map, not a manifesto. The analysis assumes that durable political change arises from the alignment of institutions, narratives, incentives, and organizational craft. By making those alignments visible, the book equips scholars, journalists, public officials, advocates, and citizens to understand how contemporary conservatism organizes power—and, by extension, how any movement might.

## CHAPTER ONE: A Movement Reconfigured: From Fusionism to Populism

The intellectual foundations of modern American conservatism, often referred to as "fusionism," were meticulously crafted in the crucible of the Cold War. It was a grand ideological bargain, brokered primarily by figures like William F. Buckley Jr. and Frank Meyer at *National Review* magazine in the 1950s. This "fusion" sought to unite three distinct, sometimes fractious, strands of thought: economic libertarians, social traditionalists, and staunch anti-communists. The common enemy—Soviet communism abroad and collectivism at home—provided a powerful unifying force, papering over inherent tensions and forging a coherent movement that would ultimately propel Ronald Reagan to the presidency.

Fusionism's core tenets were clear: a belief in limited government, free enterprise, and a transcendent moral order. Libertarians championed individual liberty and free markets, while traditionalists emphasized virtue, custom, and established institutions. The anti-communist imperative provided a hawkish foreign policy stance and a clear existential threat around which all factions could rally. This coalition proved remarkably successful, laying the groundwork for the conservative ascendancy of the late 20th century, often associated with the "New Right" that emerged in the 1960s and 70s.

However, even during its heyday, fusionism contained internal disagreements that were largely suppressed by the overriding concern of battling communism. Libertarians, for instance, were often wary of traditionalists' inclination towards state intervention in moral matters, while traditionalists sometimes viewed unfettered market forces as corrosive to communal values. These tensions, while latent, were never fully resolved. The triumph of the Cold War, instead of solidifying the fusionist consensus, paradoxically began to expose its fault lines. With the common enemy vanquished, the various factions within the conservative movement began to grapple with what their agenda should be in a post-Cold War world.

The early 1990s marked a critical juncture. The absence of communism removed the primary external glue that held fusionism together, allowing existing theoretical divisions to become more pronounced. Debates erupted, particularly between "paleoconservatives" and "neoconservatives." Paleoconservatives, often associated with figures like Pat Buchanan, were skeptical of foreign interventionism, wary of globalization, and emphasized cultural preservation and national sovereignty. Neoconservatives, many of whom were former liberals who had moved right, advocated for a more assertive, interventionist foreign policy aimed at promoting

democracy and universal rights.

This period also saw the nascent stirrings of a new kind of conservative politics: populism. While populist themes are not entirely new to American political discourse, the specific flavor that began to gain traction on the right in the 1990s was distinct. It harnessed a growing resentment against perceived cultural elites, often within the media, academia, and government bureaucracy, who were seen as out of touch with the concerns of "ordinary Americans."

Pat Buchanan's presidential campaigns in 1992 and 1996, while ultimately unsuccessful, demonstrated the electoral potential of this burgeoning conservative populism. He articulated a vision of a corrupt elite undermining authentic American values and pursuing a globalist agenda detrimental to the working class. This resonated with a segment of the Republican base, particularly white, non-college educated voters in the Rust Belt. The rise of conservative talk radio, spearheaded by figures like Rush Limbaugh, and the advent of Fox News also played a crucial role in amplifying populist narratives and creating dedicated media networks that bypassed traditional gatekeepers.

The economic anxieties of the working class, particularly those impacted by deindustrialization and global trade, provided fertile ground for populist appeals. While fusionism had largely championed unfettered free markets and deregulation, a nascent economic nationalism began to challenge this consensus. Concerns about the erosion of domestic industries and the impact of globalization on American jobs started to gain traction, a clear departure from the traditional libertarian emphasis on global market efficiency.

The events of the early 21st century further accelerated this shift. The Iraq War, championed by neoconservatives, ultimately led to a decline in their influence within the movement and fueled skepticism about foreign entanglements among a significant portion of the conservative base. The 2008 financial crisis exposed perceived failings of unregulated capitalism, making some conservatives more open to arguments for government intervention, albeit with a nationalist rather than statist bent. These events collectively chipped away at the old fusionist compact, creating a vacuum that new ideological configurations would seek to fill.

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 is widely seen as the definitive moment where fusionism, as the dominant force in American conservatism, gave way to a new, populist-driven orthodoxy. Trump's campaign directly challenged many of the long-held tenets of fusionism: he questioned free trade agreements, expressed skepticism about international alliances, and attacked established institutions and elites with unvarnished populist rhetoric. This was not a sudden rupture but rather the culmination of decades of simmering discontent and an evolving media landscape that allowed populist messages to reach and mobilize a mass audience.

The "new fusionism," as some have termed it, is still structured around the familiar elements of economics, culture, and national security, but with significant shifts in emphasis and content. Economically, it embraces a populist nationalism, prioritizing domestic labor and national sovereignty over the free-market fundamentalism of the past. Culturally, it doubles down on traditional values in opposition to a perceived "post-materialist cosmopolitan, multicultural" agenda. In national security, it leans towards a more realist foreign policy, questioning interventions and emphasizing national interests.

This transformation is not merely rhetorical; it reflects a fundamental reordering of priorities and a strategic reorientation within the conservative movement. The focus has moved beyond simply dismantling the administrative state, a traditional libertarian goal, to potentially using state power to advance national-conservative ends. This shift represents a profound departure from the intellectual consensus that guided the conservative movement for decades and sets the stage for the strategic innovations and organizational developments that will be explored in subsequent chapters. The old map of conservative power has been redrawn, and understanding its new contours is essential to comprehending contemporary right-wing politics.



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