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Political ideas

How to write an Edexcel essay on conservatism

This article should be read alongside ‘Conservatives and conservatism: “mugged by reality”?’ by Richard Kelly

Political ideas essay questions focus on human nature, society, state and economy. You will be expected to understand the similarities and differences between the three strands of conservatism outlined in the specification: traditional, one-nation and new right. Within the new right we also have two seemingly contradictory sub-strands: neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism.

Edexcel political ideas essays require the following:

- AO1 – accurate subject knowledge: this is essential, and provides the building blocks of your essay
- AO2 – balance: agreement and disagreement between strands must be covered, but a 50/50 split is definitely not desirable
- Thinkers: at least two from the specification must be included
- AO3 – judgement: you need to weigh up the amount of agreement in comparison to disagreement (see above — this is why you do not want a 50/50 split)

Sample plan

To what extent do all conservatives agree that the state should be limited?

	Agreement	Disagreement	Judgement
Paragraph 1 Topic: the size and purpose of the state.	One-nation and traditional conservatives believe in a paternalistic state with some level of intervention.	New right: individuals should be self-reliant. One-nation: the state should support those in need.	There is significant difference over the size and role of the state.
Paragraph 2 Topic: private property and intervention in the economy.	All conservatives believe in the significance and value of private property, for different reasons.	New right: the free-market economy protects individual freedom. One-nation: a welfare state funded by taxation.	There is significant difference over the relationship between the state and the economic system.

Integrating the key thinkers

Confusingly, there is no one-nation key thinker in the specification. However, Disraeli is often used by students to outline such beliefs. For example, in the above essay he would illustrate how one-nation conservatives wanted a more interventionist state in order to protect the status quo and prevent political and social unrest. However, Disraeli does not 'count' as a thinker, so you need to also include two others who do. You could contrast a traditional conservative, e.g. Burke, with a new right conservative, e.g. Nozick.

Sample use of thinkers

Neo-liberal conservatives believe individuals should be able to operate freely within the competitive free market. Ayn Rand argued that the state should have a very limited role in society and should refrain entirely from intervening in the economy. She saw humans as self-seeking and autonomous, with no responsibilities towards others. In stark contrast, one-nation conservatives are concerned about inequality, as they believe it could lead to revolution and radical change. They therefore favour a welfare state that protects the less fortunate. Edmund Burke argued that the fortunate had a duty and obligation to look after the poor. In addition, it is in the interests of the wealthy to do this, as it will protect social stability.

Addressing 'To what extent...' questions

You will be exploring the areas of agreement and disagreement within the political idea in relation to the topic in the question. This is AO2. However, to gain AO3 marks as well, you need to go beyond this to measure how much *more* disagreement or agreement there is in relation to the topic of the question. Is the level of disagreement significant? Or is it more balanced, so that there is only moderately more disagreement or agreement? Some students find it useful to think of this as a sliding scale. You need to address 'to what extent' clearly in your introduction, every paragraph and conclusion. Do not ignore it or leave it until your conclusion.

Exam tips

For political ideas questions there is a shift from 45 minutes to 30 minutes for writing your essay, so you will need to write less. Also, remember that you are no longer analysing a statement: you are looking at areas of agreement and disagreement within an idea, and exploring which there is more of and why. This is a different essay skill and requires a different structure.

For a top-level mark, make sure that you refer to all the strands, not just one-nation and new right. Traditional conservatism is often forgotten, and it's important to pick out the neo-liberal and neo-conservative aspects of the New Right too, and how they both contradict and support each other.

When you discuss agreement within an idea, it does not have to include all strands. Within conservatism, you will find that one-nation and traditional conservatives agree in many areas, e.g. the natural leadership of the ruling elite, but the new right do not.

Student task

Write a plan for one of the following essay questions and make sure you include at least two contrasting key thinkers:

1. To what extent do all conservatives agree on a limited role for the state?
2. To what extent do all conservatives fear change?

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