


STUDENT GUIDE

SECOND EDITION



With
exam-style
questions
and model
answers

PEARSON EDEXCEL A-LEVEL

Politics

Political ideas

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Content Guidance

Core political ideas

■ Conservatism

Conservatism is an ideology that is constantly evolving and is remarkably successful as a result. It is in opposition to change and favours protecting traditions, but it can accept slow change if it is necessary. Most but not all conservatives believe that humans are imperfect and vulnerable and therefore a strong government is needed to guide and protect.

Core ideas and principles

Pragmatism

A pragmatist seeking to solve a problem turns not to fixed ideas or theories but to practicalities — what is the most sensible and workable way to resolve this issue? Conservatives often describe themselves as non-**ideological** in that they do not believe in absolutes. Instead they advocate a ‘what works’ approach based on circumstances and experience. This can make the ideology itself quite hard to pin down for students and can also suggest that conservatism is not an ideology at all but is merely what conservatives themselves might describe as ‘common sense’ and critics might describe as advocating what might be popular in order to win elections. It also suggests that conservatism is flexible and able to vary its values.

Linked concept

A pragmatic approach to politics in conservatism led to the belief in change to preserve, despite being opposed to change. If it was necessary to preserve the status quo, e.g. by increasing the size of the electorate, this should be carried out. (See page 7.)

Pragmatism suggests that politics should be based on circumstances and events rather than on ideological objectives. Conservatives reject abstract and rigid theories such as those associated with Marxism and see them as dangerous as they are not rooted in history and traditions and can therefore cause chaos and instability in society. They are supporters of **empiricism**. This view is linked to their rather negative view of human nature. Conservatives therefore reject all utopian ideas as they are a rejection of tradition, knowledge and learned wisdom.

Despite conservatism’s claims to be a tradition rather than an ideology, it is clear that conservatives share a range of core beliefs, alongside some variables. These will be explored below. So conservatism is not entirely based on pragmatism.

Ideological Relating to a set of political ideas/body of doctrine. Most conservatives would describe themselves as pragmatic rather than ideological.

Exam tip

Although conservatism is more pragmatic than other ideologies, it clearly does have some core values that you must know.

Empiricism A rejection of ideology. The theory that knowledge comes from tradition and experience rather than from ideas.

Tradition

This refers to the significance and importance of learning from previous generations and having a connection to what has gone before. For weak and insecure humans, tradition helps us to feel safe and to understand where we fit in. We are connected to our ancestors and to those who will follow us in the future. This helps us form our personal identities and to feel connections to others with shared histories and culture, thus creating social cohesion.

For conservatives in the UK, tradition can be found in institutions such as the monarchy, the Church of England, the House of Lords and the armed forces. Americans could seek security in the flag, the Constitution and in celebrations such as the 4th of July. These institutions have developed and survived over hundreds of years and are therefore full of wisdom and should be preserved for the future. They cannot simply be abolished and replaced as such a move would lead to dangerous instability.

Most conservatives are suspicious of change, as it goes against tradition and creates insecurity in vulnerable and weak humans. This belief in the importance of tradition can lead some conservatives to be suspicious of multiculturalism and immigration. Much of the conservative view of tradition comes from the religious beliefs of many (but not all) conservatives and can be linked to many religions, not just Christianity.

Exam tip

Don't forget that not all forms of conservatism value tradition — neo-liberals are in favour of change and are rationalists.

However, this does not imply that all conservatives are opposed to any form of change but simply that change should be slow and evolutionary rather than **radical**, and it should take place only if it is seen as absolutely necessary. So, while the Conservative Party originally opposed devolution, it now sees it as a way to protect the union. Change here is a response to specific circumstances — devolution had taken place and could not be abolished — rather than something that the party initially wanted and can be described as **change to conserve**. Change should also be based on an analysis of previous events, rather than for abstract reasons or utopian visions.

Linked to this faith in tradition comes a firm belief in the value and significance of private property. Conservatives believe that ownership gives insecure individuals security and independence from the government, while also encouraging respect for the law and for the property of others. Property owners are therefore more likely to be supportive of the status quo, fearing change might lead to a threat to their property rights. They will respect those in **authority** who help to protect what they own and will support the traditional family values that will allow them to pass on a legacy to future generations. They also argue that private property is a way for individuals to express their personality and character, for example through furnishings. This belief in the value and significance of private property is at the heart of all conservative thinking and one of the few areas in which there is agreement.

Radical Far-reaching and thorough, a major departure from what has gone before.

Change to conserve

The belief that change may be necessary but should be slow, evolutionary and based on experience in order to protect tradition and to prevent social instability.

Authority The legitimate right to rule and to have power over others. This right can come from tradition, a monarch for example, or through election, such as a prime minister.

Knowledge check 1

What do conservatives mean by property?

Key thinkers and their ideas

Edmund Burke (1729–97)

Burke, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), rejected liberal ideas, specifically the idea of progress as desirable. He argued that inheritance and tradition were the basis of a stable society, and that the institutions and beliefs that form society are formed by the wisdom and knowledge of those who came before us and must be respected. He used France — the tyranny and disaster of the aftermath of the 1789 revolution — as an example of what happens when you destroy this past knowledge. Burke argued for continuity — ‘change is only necessary in order to conserve’ — and saw society as a partnership or bond between the dead, the living and the unborn future generations rather than a social contract between the government and the governed. These connections create stability and security in society and create social order, preventing social chaos.

Burke, like many conservatives, also rejected the abstract ideas and theories, e.g. rights, that developed as a result of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. He rejected democracy and saw inequality as natural. The people should be represented by the elite and the wise (the same thing), who would not be delegates but would follow their own conscience in making decisions. Burke was not a supporter of social contract theory, which suggests that the relationship between the government and the governed can be broken if power is abused. Society exists to provide individuals with a link to the past and future. However, Burke defended the Glorious Revolution and did not believe in absolute monarchy, rather that the king should be constrained by a parliament elected by the few.

Human imperfection

Conservatives see human nature as selfish and flawed, and as emotional rather than rational. This pessimism impacts on their view of the society and the state. First, conservatives see human nature as psychologically weak. Due to our fragile and vulnerable nature, we desperately seek security and this can be found in **hierarchy**, a social system in which we all know our place and our roles and happily defer to the natural leaders who will be positioned above us. This is clearly in stark contrast to the optimistic beliefs of liberals and it leads most conservatives to value order above freedom and liberty.

Linked concept

A belief in hierarchy suggests a belief in authority. In order to maintain the divisions in society there needs to be obedience to those at the top.

Our vulnerability also means that some individuals are likely to become criminals. Unlike that of liberals and socialists, this view of human nature suggests that humans do not have a natural sense of morality. Our human nature is selfish and greedy and we can have a tendency to violence. We require institutions such as the education system, the nuclear family and the police to impose the values of right and wrong on us. This has implications for the role and powers of the state. Without a strong state,

Hierarchy A society ordered on an unequal basis, with those at the top holding authority and those on the lower levels obeying those above them. This structure is not based on ability or talent.

Knowledge check 2

What is meant by the doctrine of original sin?

Conservatism

To what extent do all conservatives agree that human nature is imperfect?

You must use appropriate thinkers you have studied to support your answer and consider both sides in a balanced way.

(24 marks)

As with all political ideas questions, you must look at areas of agreement and disagreement with regard to human nature. Are we rational or ruled by emotion and fear? Then weigh up how significant the level of disagreement is compared to the level of agreement in order to reach your conclusion.

Student A answer

A belief in the imperfection of human nature implies that we are vulnerable, weak and potentially dangerous as a species, and that we therefore require a strong state to provide security. Most conservatives believe this and the history of conservatism has been dominated by this view. However, the late twentieth-century development of neo-liberal conservatism has a different view. Like liberals, they believe in the selfish and rational individual, whose freedom should not be restricted by the state. Conservatives do not agree over human nature.

One-nation, traditional conservatism and, more recently, the neo-conservative strand of the New Right are defined by the belief in human imperfection. Most conservatives strongly agree with this view. This involves the view that humans are first morally weak, in that they do not have an innate sense of right and wrong and are highly emotional and jealous, so will steal the property of others or commit violent acts. Second, there is the belief that the majority of humans are not particularly intellectually able, and that they do not fully understand the complex world that surrounds them. Finally, there is the belief that humans are emotionally and mentally very fragile, easily frightened and often insecure in their surroundings. Each of these arguments has political implications.

First, if humans commit crime due to psychological weakness, this means that you cannot blame circumstances such as poverty and inequality for criminal behaviour. The individual is responsible for the crimes they commit and harsh punishments must be imposed to deter others from doing the same. The role of the state must be to maintain law and order. Thomas Hobbes had a very negative view of human nature, seeing individuals as needing strict authority as otherwise they would live in a 'state of war'.

Second, if humans cannot make sense of the wider world and are often lacking in intellectual ability, they cannot understand abstract philosophical ideas or aims. Politics should therefore be based on pragmatism, looking back to the past and 'what works'. Rapid change is dangerous and slow reform or sticking to the status quo is

The opening paragraph defines the term in the question (A01) and introduces the debate clearly and accurately, showing the areas of disagreement (A02) and linking them to the strands. There is a clear reference to A03 in the final sentence.

The opening sentence links the argument to the different strands of conservatism and begins a careful analysis of exactly what is meant by human imperfection (A01). The second sentence makes it clear that this paragraph is focusing on the significance of the areas of agreement (A03) within the political idea.

More on what is meant by human imperfection (A01) and how it affects the conservative view of the role of the state and law (A02). Useful addition of a supporting key thinker.

Usefully links human imperfection with other core themes of conservatism (A02) but with a close focus on the question. The paragraph ends with a judgement (A03) that links back to the question.

preferable as imperfect individuals will find that easier to deal with. This is reflected in the conservative belief in the significance of tradition. Michael Oakeshott argued that conservatives would always prefer 'the familiar to the unknown'. This again shows a strong area of agreement within most strands of conservatism.

Third, emotional instability suggests again that rapid change in society is deeply undesirable. Humans need to have a role in the organic society, knowing where they fit as part of a wider whole, in order to feel safe and secure. Humans want to feel protected, rather than free, and that is the role of the state. Hierarchy is also important so individuals respect, fear and look up to those above them in the pecking order and do what they are told. Equality is not desirable or seen as natural in any strand of conservatism. Edmund Burke believed strongly in the value of hierarchy in society, based on property ownership. The class system was to the benefit of all classes and would prevent the destruction and chaos brought about as a result of revolutions, such as in France in 1789.

However, in recent years the New Right has taken many liberal ideas and departed from the traditional and one-nation view of human nature. The neo-liberal strand of the New Right believes strongly in the rights and liberties of the rational selfish individual who must operate freely within the capitalist market. This view of human nature rejects the idea of imperfection and weakness, and instead sees individuals as able to make decisions and take choices using reason and logic, and able to work out the best way to control and improve their own destiny. Ayn Rand's theory of objectivism was the belief that 'man exists for his own sake' and she saw individuals as utterly selfish and needing to be in complete charge of their own affairs. This has implications for the state, and New Right conservatives believe in a state that does not intervene in the economy. Robert Nozick agreed, arguing that individual liberty should be the aim of government and people should even be free to enter contracts to become slaves, if they chose to. This is in stark contrast to the views of Thomas Hobbes. However, like all conservatives, the neo-liberal strand of the New Right still believes in a role for the state in upholding social order. Neo-liberalism is linked to libertarianism, a viewpoint that suggests there should be very little intervention in the lives of citizens.

In conclusion, it is clear that new liberal conservatives no longer agree that humans are imperfect and this is due to the strong influence of liberalism on this strand of conservatism. However, this belief is still central to traditional and one-nation conservatism as well as neo-conservatism so there is clearly much more agreement than disagreement in this area.

The debate requires close focus on 'to what extent'. This paragraph shows that there clearly isn't agreement, as New Right conservatives reject the belief in human imperfection. The comparison between two thinkers, Nozick and Hobbes, is very useful in supporting this analysis (A02).

A focused and logical conclusion that reaches a logical judgement (A03) based on the arguments made in the essay.

21/24 marks awarded (Level 5) This essay is quite brief but includes no unfocused sections. It is analytical and evaluative throughout and reaches a conclusion clearly supported by the argument running through the essay. There is regular and integrated use of the key thinkers throughout and use of relevant terminology. The student shows in-depth knowledge and understanding of the theories and concepts linked to human imperfection. It would be useful to have a direct link back to the wording of the question in each paragraph.

Student B answer

Most conservatives believe that humans are unintelligent, dependent creatures. They believe that authority and hierarchy are needed in order to keep humans in their place or keep them knowing their place. Because humans are so imperfect, they need a sense of leadership and authority to guide them in the right direction and keep them from making immoral decisions and choices. Hobbes argued in *Leviathan* that he believed that if people lived without a strong state, there would be war of 'all against all' and that life would be 'nasty, brutish and short'.

Adding to that, conservatives believe in tradition and believe in conserving tradition in order to protect humans. If there is any change, humans would not know what to do because they are so imperfect and unintelligent and a proposed change would endanger the individual's happiness.

Furthermore, conservatives believe that individuals are born imperfect and unequal as this is inevitable for an organic society. They therefore believe in paternalism as a way of helping those imperfect humans because imperfection is not their fault. Not only that, conservatives believe in making small changes rather than large ones, to make life easier for imperfect humans in order to prevent a bigger change, such as a revolution, as humans may be frustrated with their imperfection.

Adding to that, because conservatives believe that humans are imperfect they stress the importance of private property as a way for humans to express their talents and personality. Conservatives believe that owning property gives individuals reassurance in order to cope with their imperfection. Private property is one of the ways that conservatives can ensure that humans won't rebel because owning private property upholds conservative values such as law, order and authority.

Conservatives believe that because human beings are imperfect, dependent creatures, it is important to have traditional institutions in place, e.g. the monarchy, judiciary and police system, to act as a restraint over the individual in order to prevent them from making wrong decisions which are likely because human nature is so flawed. Edmund Burke believed that traditional institutions were vital as they maintained social order and were a link between the present and the past.

This introduction does not address the question directly as it does not explain that there is a debate in conservatism over this. Instead, it suggests that there is no debate — 'most conservatives believe'. It would be useful to mention the strands — traditional and New Right specifically. 'Unintelligent' is not the right term to use — flawed, security-seeking or psychologically vulnerable would be more accurate (A01). The reference to Hobbes is useful but undeveloped. There is no sense of debate here (A02) or judgement (A03).

More needed to develop this paragraph — the student needs to explain why a belief in the significance of tradition is linked to a belief that human nature is flawed.

Again, it would be really useful if the student referred to the strands here — the opening sentence is about traditional and one-nation conservatism but that is not stated. As a result there is plenty of knowledge here (A01), but little analysis and awareness of areas of agreement and disagreement (A02). It also seems as though the student is attempting to write all they know about the core themes of conservatism rather than focusing on the question.

The fourth and fifth paragraphs continue the useful exploration of why conservatives believe that humans are imperfect, but there is still no link to the different strands and no suggestion that there will be a debate as some conservatives do not believe this.