



The Case for Polarized Politics: Why America Needs Social Conservatism

Jeffrey Bell

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Because no movement resembling American social conservatism exists in any other affluent democracy, it is widely seen as a “retro” phenomenon soon to disappear, a sure casualty of globalization.

Author and political activist Jeffrey Bell argues that social conservatism is uniquely American precisely because it’s an outgrowth of American exceptionalism. It exists here because our founding principles, centering on the belief that we receive equal rights from God rather than from government, remain popular among American voters—if not at elite institutions.

Bell argues that upheavals of the 1960s set the stage for social conservatism’s rise. The left’s agenda, particularly the sexual revolution, triumphed among elite opinion in the U.S., Europe, Japan, and elsewhere. This happened after the left sidelined its century-long drive for socialism and returned to its roots in the 18th-century thought of Rousseau and the revolutionary Jacobins, radicals who sought to break free from civilizing institutions, particularly religion and the family.

American social conservatism derives from a branch of the Enlightenment that Bell analyzes as the “conservative enlightenment.” The ability of this optimistic belief system, which dominated the American founding and transformed the English-speaking world, to spread its natural-law-centered vision of democracy will affect the shape of politics in the decades ahead.

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