

# Handout

## Comparative Decades: Conservatism in the 1920s and 1980s

Introduction: The conservative Republican dominance of both the 1920s and the 1980s shows the recurring attraction of conservatism for Americans. Our quest for today is to compare and contrast these two conservative decades with the goal of understanding these three questions:

- What is conservatism?
- How has it changed throughout the twentieth century?
- Why is it appealing to so many Americans?

1. Begin by reading the following quote:



President Calvin Coolidge (NARA  
NWDNS-115-P-136)

“One of Republican Ronald Reagan’s first acts upon entering the White House in 1981 was to display a portrait of Calvin Coolidge. Reagan’s act of devotion to a relatively obscure Republican president of the 1920s puzzled many observers. Most perplexing was the fact that Reagan, the amiable former Hollywood actor known as the “Great Communicator,” seemed to share little with “Silent Cal,” the taciturn, puritanical New Englander. But President Reagan’s act of devotion was fraught with symbolism. It revealed his longing to return to Calvin Coolidge’s conservative America—a nation characterized by Republican-controlled politics, nativist-dominated society, traditionalist cultural values, limited federal government, and an economy governed by corporate executives and financiers.” (*Michael Schaller and George Rising, The Republican Ascendancy: American Politics, 1968-2001 [Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2002], 1*)

2. Define Terms:

Conservatism

Nativism

Traditional cultural values

Others?

3. Activity: Working with your partner or group, create a chart comparing these two decades. Use your textbook and other resources to help you complete this activity.

	1920s	1980s
Republican-controlled politics: control (presidents and congress)		
Major political issues		
Nativism		
Traditional cultural values		
Limited federal government		
Economy governed by corporate executives and financiers		
Other comparisons		
Contrasts		