DISCUSSION PUBLISHERS
Research Center · Open Access Edition

Who cares about Africa? British and American conservatisms in African development

Stefan Andreasson

Discussion Research ID	DPR-2026-1420
Year	2018
Field	Social Sciences
Author ORCID	0000-0002-8443-7271
Licence	PUBLIC-DOMAIN
Original source	London School of Economics and Political Science Research Online (London School of Economi
Permanent link	https://discussionpublishers.com/research/fac21af8-2adc-41c4-b3aa-f01e210f1651
Publisher	Discussion Publishers discussionpublishers.com

Abstract

Stefan Andreasson examines how the Republican and Conservative parties dealt with African development since the late Cold War era. He explains why American input has been more prominent, while the British have come to resign themselves to a managed decline in relations with Africa. Who cares about Africa? Does political ideology inform whether or not such

Republished by Discussion Publishers under the original PUBLIC-DOMAIN licence. Copyright remains with the original authors; please cite the original work.

Cite as: Stefan Andreasson (2018). Who cares about Africa? British and American conse. Discussion Publishers, DPR-2026-1420.

Who cares about Africa? British and American conservatisms in African development



Stefan Andreasson *examines how the Republican and Conservative parties dealt with African development since the late Cold War era. He explains why American input has been more prominent, while the British have come to resign themselves to a managed decline in relations with Africa.*

Who cares about Africa? Does political ideology inform whether or not such care exists and how it is translated into action? And are, as we tend to assume, some political ideologies more 'caring' than others? For conservatism in particular, the common assumption in popular discourse, and in much of scholarly work, is that it is inextricably linked to neo-colonial attitudes that defend existing hierarchies and inequalities in international relations. So, the assumption is that conservatism places the pursuit of national interest ahead of development.

In my own work I examine this assumption about a link between political ideology – in this case British and American conservatism – and actual political engagement by political actors with development in post-colonial Africa. Findings are based on interviews in London and Washington, including with high-level ministers and ambassadors of the Republican and Conservative parties, associated conservative think tanks, lobbying groups and the like.

Understanding this link between ideology and politics is instructive for two key reasons. Firstly, it makes it possible to understand how and why conservative governments have shaped policies towards Africa, with all the consequences that the foreign policies of two of the most important external actors engaged in the affairs of many African countries entail. Secondly, it sheds light on conservatism as an ideology, including how conservatives as political actors differ from each other in Britain and the US.

The comparative approach is crucial in order to avoid a simplistic view of conservatism as being intellectually homogeneous across different countries and time periods; while change across time is accounted for here by examining shifts in engagement from the Cold War-era Reagan and Thatcher governments to the more recent G. W. Bush and Cameron governments. And while conservatism, like any other political ideology, is not synonymous with the aims and actions of any specific political party, periods of government by the Republican Party and the Conservative Party serve in either case as a the most useful proxy available for understanding the impact of conservatism as an ideological force in politics.

Differences between British and American approaches to dealing with issues of African development have emerged from each country's trajectory in the post-World War II era and are somewhat paradoxical. The findings are more substantial in the case of US conservatism and policymaking by Republican governments than they are for their counterparts in the UK. A greater degree of ideological heterogeneity and distinctiveness among American conservative interest groups, combined with a bureaucratic environment in the US that provides more direct channels for ideological input into policy, have resulted in a more clearly conservative stamp on Africa policy. The characteristics and consequences of US conservatism stand in contrast to a more coherent but also less animated brand of conservatism in the UK where ideological lines on development have become more blurred since the 1997 New Labour government and the creation of the Department for International Development.

One key difference is the way in which American conservatives have actively shaped policy towards Africa through their impact on health and social policy during G W Bush's presidency, the capstone of which was the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief policy which remains the greatest single investment by any entity into public health in Africa. This active involvement reflects a confident and influential evangelical Christian dimension of conservatism that has no comparable presence in the UK, irrespective of a modest revival during the years in opposition leading up to 2010 including the modest Christian rhetoric employed by Cameron and some of his ministers when discussing Britain's heritage and the Big Society.

This engagement on the part of American conservatives has emerged even though the country's historical ties to Africa are less significant than those of Britain, the considerable population of African descendants in the US notwithstanding. By contrast British conservatives have, despite a history of Empire and sentimental ties including substantial migration of Britons to settle across Africa, somewhat cynically come to resign themselves to a managed decline in relations with Africa, including a diminishing ability to impact events across the continent.

Date originally posted: 2018-01-30

Permalink: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/who-cares-about-africa-british-and-american-conservatisms-in-african-development/

Blog homepage: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/

Discussion Publishers edition DPR-2026-1420 https://discussionpublishers.com/research/fac21af8-2adc-41c4-b3aa-f01e210f1651

While US political commentators are fond of the notion that “politics ends at the water’s edge”, this is more so the case in the UK when it comes to post-colonial relations with Africa. The big difference is not primarily in terms of how British and American conservatives differ from their domestic ideological opponents on engagement with Africa, but how they differ from each other. For their African counterparts, this means that relations with the UK have remained largely a case of dealing with – depending on the perspective – a familiar ally or adversary, whereas in their engagement with the US it has increasingly become a case of needing to familiarise themselves with a new suitor.

Recent political upheaval within both American and British conservatism obscures any hints of future developments as the sense of priorities and direction of both Prime Minister May’s government and President Trump’s administration are, to put it mildly, fraught with uncertainties. But future relations will surely be shaped by broader ideological shifts in the West prompted by a need to adapt to the transformation of international relations as a result of the rise of the Global South, including the transformation of Africa’s role in the global system and its gradual shift away from the West.

———

Note: the above draws on the author’s published work in *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*.

About the Author



Stefan Andreasson is Senior Lecturer in the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics at Queen’s University Belfast.

All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Featured image credit: Pixabay, Public Domain.

Date originally posted: 2018-01-30

Permalink: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/who-cares-about-africa-british-and-american-conservatisms-in-african-development/

Blog homepage: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/

Discussion Publishers edition DPR-2026-1420 https://discussionpublishers.com/research/fac21af8-2adc-41c4-b3aa-f01e210f1651