

In Trump Era, a Chance to Reboot Conservatism

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By his flamboyance, crudity, and eclectic priorities as well as by his explicit statements, President Donald Trump has made it clear that the Republican Party is not identical to conservatism. That has always been true of the modern GOP dominated by Ronald Reagan's long shadow. But the 2016 divergence was of unprecedented proportions.

Grumblings from within the conservative movement about Republican candidates' deviation from the litmus test du jour are common. Yet never before had a critical mass of eminent conservative intellectuals, policy experts, political operatives, and former government officials risen up during a presidential campaign to declare the leading contender for the Republican nomination outside conservatism's big tent and denounce him as unfit for the White House. Never before had Republican voters so decisively repudiated elite conservative opinion.

The risks that President Trump poses for conservatism and the nation have been examined extensively. Less obvious are the lessons to be learned from his victory and the opportunities his presidency presents for conservatism and the nation.

The winter issue of *National Affairs* takes up the challenge. A journal of public policy and highbrow opinion, the publication and editor Yuval Levin have been loosely associated with the Never Trump crowd. Levin, who writes for such conservative redoubts as the *Weekly Standard* and *National Review*, is a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a small Washington think tank, which, like the journal he edits, punches above its weight. Demonstrating the utility of political philosophy and history to the understanding of contemporary politics, the two lead articles in *National Affairs* explore the character and condition of the disaffected working-class people crucial to Trump's election.

In "[Our Country Split Apart](#)," Peter Augustine Lawler shrewdly observes that Trump ran as a conservative in an old-fashioned and neglected sense. The GOP nominee took Rust Belt voters and their concerns seriously, "promising to protect what they have—their industrial jobs, their unions, even their Social Security and Medicare—while restoring at least some of what they've lost." Their losses, according to Lawler, a professor of government at Berry College, have been considerable. They include a sense of "personal dignity" that accompanies living in strong families and robust communities—along with the confidence that comes from knowing you are respected by your fellow citizens, not least the political and cultural elites who set the national tone.

Notwithstanding its benefits, globalization has hit working-class men and working-class communities hard, argues Lawler, depriving breadwinners of their livelihood by stimulating the flow of cheap labor into America and the shipping of manufacturing abroad to take advantage of cheap labor in distant locales. At the same time, elites whose work revolves around the manipulation of words, images, and concepts look down on those who work with their hands, who lift and move heavy objects, and who protect and defend. Elites are keen to employ “scripting and nudging—gentle but increasingly intrusive modes of controlling” to improve blue-collar workers while disdaining to actually get to know them.

Having felt this condescension for many years, middle-class voters use the democratic process to find representatives who honor them and their concerns. But the Obama years have witnessed a change. Whereas the Tea Party was an essentially libertarian movement that sought to restore respect for limited constitutional government, the populism that propelled Trump to the White House, maintains Lawler, allows for “a huge role for government and its capacity to provide security and make good deals for Americans.”

For Lawler, “rethinking conservatism” begins with revising the crude dichotomy between rights-bearing individuals and bullying majorities threatening to infringe individual freedom. That way of thinking omits the possibility of a majority “formed by a process of deliberation and compromise” and it neglects the in-between associations and institutions of civil society where individuals and groups collaborate and compete unsupervised by the state.

To encourage the spirit of deliberation and compromise, Lawler proposes less reliance on elite institutions and more on the people; reining in of courts and bureaucracies and expanding the responsibility of legislatures; and cultivating respect for the diversity of principles at play in American politics, which means learning to appreciate, for example, the truth within cosmopolitanism *and* within nationalism, within individual freedom *and* within tradition.

Lawler expresses the guarded hope that Trump—whose winning coalition embraced both Tea Partiers seeking less government and evangelicals striving for more traditional morality—has the savvy and wherewithal to foster this new balance. Consistent with the causes he has championed, Trump could join recognition that “same-sex marriage is here to stay” with a commitment to Americans’ “right to determine what marriage is within the context of their religious communities without being cut off or ostracized by government agencies—without being marginalized as citizens.” While honoring his campaign promise to put America first, Trump could also affirm that America’s vital national security interests include standing up at home and abroad for the rights that all human beings share.

In “Can Conservatism Rise Again?”, Lee Edwards agrees with Lawler that Trump has the potential to advance conservative concerns, in part because “he tapped into a constituency that has been at the center of the Republican Party and the conservative movement for six decades—Middle America.” A distinguished historian of American conservatism and a

Heritage Foundation fellow, Edwards argues that the Republican Party—like the conservative movement—“has always been comprised of distinct factions with their own interests, often united by a common enemy as much as a common cause.”

Although the GOP and conservatives are not inextricably bound to one another, together they are well positioned to deal with “the problems and divisions revealed by this election.” That’s because the conservative movement and the Republican Party that has provided its political home have always needed to reconcile competing elements.

But what is the principle of reconciliation? “If,” Edwards writes, “reformicons and Tea Partiers, along with traditionalists, libertarians, paleoconservatives, and neoconservatives could form a broad alliance—a New Fusionism—based on the first principles of the founding, despite their divergences on some particulars, American conservatism could affect the course of American politics at a critical time in our nation’s history.”

A properly constitutional conservatism aims to preserve the Constitution’s formal structures—separation of powers, checks and balances, federalism—to safeguard political freedom. It also seeks to recover that founding commitment to balance and accommodation that gave rise to those constitutional forms and which those forms are designed to foster.

President Trump will have his hands full cutting taxes, curbing regulation, repealing and replacing Obamacare, reforming immigration, appointing judges, rebuilding the military, and restoring American leadership abroad. Surely the consummate dealmaker realizes he can’t do it alone. A constitutional conservatism remains in the era of Trump the firmest ground on which Republicans—and deal-making Democrats—can cooperate to advance the public interest.

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