

Can Trump's Populist-Conservative Coalition Hold?

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COMMENTARY



AP Photo/Susan Walsh

Conservatives—indeed, all Americans—should take heart: The constitutional order is showing its resilience.

Whether because of or despite President Trump's numerous executive orders reducing the regulatory burden on business and the tax reform he signed into law in December, the economy is humming. Unemployment, including for blacks and Latinos, is at or near record lows.

The separation of powers is working, and the rule of law abides. For more than a year, Special Counsel Robert Mueller, an executive-branch appointee, has investigated possible links between Russian interference in the 2016 election and the Trump campaign. Meanwhile, House and Senate committees probe possible abuses of power by the FBI and the Department of Justice in the counterintelligence investigation of the Trump campaign launched by the Obama administration in the summer of 2016, which Mueller was assigned

to continue. Although unsightly and disruptive, the welter of investigations and investigations of investigations demonstrates that neither the president nor Department of Justice prosecutors and FBI agents are above the law.

And every day much of the media proves through its ruthless, round-the-clock condemnation of the administration that freedom of the press in America is alive and well.

Accordingly, the prospects are growing that, notwithstanding an abundance of dire warnings that Trump's inauguration marked an unparalleled threat to liberty, democracy, and all that decent Americans hold dear, the country as we know it may well survive his tumultuous presidency.

Whether conservatism as we know it will survive is another question.

Trump's candidacy precipitated bitter schisms within the conservative movement. While deeply offending establishment conservatives, his broadsides against free trade and illegal immigrants appealed to swing voters who blamed globalization and America's failure to police its southern border for their economic woes.

Trump, furthermore, was neither a champion of traditional morality nor an advocate of limited government—the two principal components of the post-World War II conservative synthesis. His coarseness, impetuosity, and bombast appeared ill-suited to, if not irreconcilable with, the discipline and deliberation that conservatives prize.

Voters thrilled by Trump's candidacy considered his attacks on the establishment, very much including the GOP establishment, a vital part of his appeal. The establishment, very much including the GOP establishment, lashed out at Trump and, by extension, those who embraced him.

Contemptuous of the Republican nominee and his voters, elites—not least those in the press—missed the populist surge that in November 2016 swept Trump to power over presumptive victor Hillary Clinton.

A notable exception among reporters was Salena Zito. While other journalists were jamming themselves on chartered buses and planes to cover the candidates, she went out on the road—at first, for the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, and then for the New York Post and CNN—to cover the voters. Her reporting from small-town, Rust Belt Pennsylvania put a human face on men and women who felt ill-served by the status quo. Neither haters nor bigots, they found in Trump a compelling candidate—one who, despite manifest shortcomings of which they were amply aware, gave voice to their discontents, celebrated the country they loved, and held out hope for the improvement of their ailing communities.

In the Atlantic in late September 2016, Zito memorably distilled the essence of the disconnect between elites and Trump voters: “the press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally.” The story of the election was not that Trump voters were uninformed about their man and their country, but that the press was uninformed about Trump voters and their communities.

In “The Great Revolt: Inside the Populist Coalition Reshaping American Politics,” Zito joins forces with Brad Todd, a founding partner at One Message Inc., a national Republican advertising and opinion research agency, to carry forward the exploration of Trump’s much-maligned and much-misunderstood supporters. The authors are particularly interested in whether Trump’s “new fusion of populism and conservatism” is a disruptive one-time affair or whether it will have an enduring impact on the shape of American politics. “Was his coalition the product of a candidacy,” Zito and Todd ask, “or did he, as a candidate, benefit from a cause that succeeded in spite of him?”

The book features in-depth interviews with voters from a mix of 10 rural, exurban and industrial-based counties in states that had formed the Democratic Blue Wall—Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa. All of the counties went to Barack Obama in 2012 and shifted to Trump in 2016. In them, the authors find “seven archetypes of the most surprising voters who make up Trump’s coalition.”

The “Red-Blooded and Blue-Collared” have received the most attention. During the Obama years, these working-class whites typically either lost a job or watched family members lose theirs, but they remained optimistic about their fortunes and the country.

The “Perot-istas” form the smallest contingent among the seven archetypes. They are infrequent voters who registered later in 2016 and were “significantly less conservative, less ideological, and less religious than the rest of the Trump pool.” They tend to “ricochet wildly between attraction to mavericks on both ends of the political spectrum, or don’t vote at all.”

The “Rough Rebounders,” according to the authors, “had experienced a setback in life and saw the same kind of vulnerability and recovery in Trump as they had experienced.”

The “Girl Gun Power” voters are strong, smart, independent women who like their guns because they provide the ability to defend themselves. They gravitated to Trump because he unequivocally endorsed Second Amendment rights.

The “Rotary Reliables” held “white-collar jobs in blue-collar communities.” Instead of identifying with the globalist inclinations of the urban elites with whom they shared educational attainments and financial success, they saw their well-being as bound up with local vitality and opportunity.

The “King Cyrus Christians” take their name from the sixth-century pagan monarch who released the Jews from the Babylonian captivity. They are religious conservatives who, despite Trump’s history of support for abortion rights and gay rights, threw their lot in with him because they believed—rightly, it turns out—his emphatic promise to nominate a Supreme Court justice and lower federal court judges in the mold of Antonin Scalia.

Finally, the “Silent Suburban Moms” tended to be less religious and less pro-life and were often reluctant to admit their preference for Trump. These women put a premium on economic issues. They especially disliked his lewdness, but Trump convinced them that he would do more for their communities than would Clinton.

Conducted especially for the book, “The Great Revolt Survey of Rural Trump Voters” complements the authors’ vivid portraits of the figures forming Trump’s coalition. It also indicates that a dominant factor driving those who determined the election, many of whom shifted from Obama to Trump, was an acute sense that the highly educated urban elites despised them.

Whether conservatives can capitalize on the populist impulses that coalesced around Trump depends on their ability to explain the dependence of America’s resilient constitutional order on individual liberty, personal responsibility, limited government, free markets, and a vibrant civil society. They must also demonstrate that these essential elements of a constitutional conservatism foster policies that promote the economic prosperity and respect the ways of life of those whose votes they seek.

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