

Conservatism and Populism Go Back Centuries

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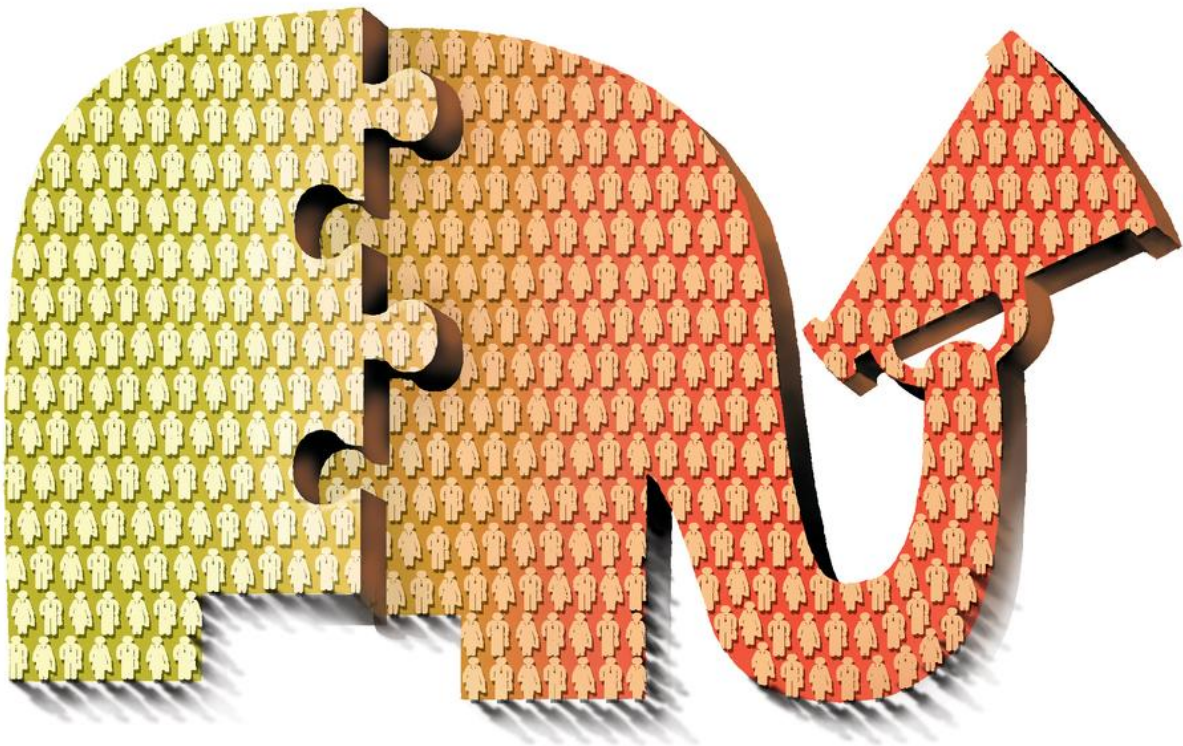


Illustration: Phil Foster

Of all the strange and remarkable features of politics in the Trump era, among the least surprising is the alliance between conservatism and populism. Donald Trump's emergence as the tribune of conservative hopes and popular anxieties was improbable. But he didn't invent the alliance between conservatism and populism—or, to speak less polemically, between conservatism and the people. He rode the wave of a populist revolt sweeping across the Western world.

In many liberal democracies, right-wing politicians have made common cause with disaffected portions of the working and middle classes. A recurring complaint reverberates across rural and suburban Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa; similar grievances roil swaths of Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Israel and Brazil:

An imperious ruling elite has imposed laws, norms and practices that radiate disdain for the people's beliefs and endanger their way of life. Elites have conspired across partisan lines to promote globalization, free trade and mass immigration, benefiting themselves while ignoring the costs for the less educated and less wealthy. Meanwhile, the mainstream press and social media, the entertainment industry and the universities—all dominated by progressive elites—propagate scorn for conservatism. Conservative elites and many regular voters find themselves bound together by a common political opponent.

Yet the alliance between conservatism and the people—between elites devoted to preserving tradition and local communities and those who want them preserved—is as old as modern conservatism itself. Its roots can be traced to 1790. In “Reflections on the Revolution in France,” Anglo-Irish statesman Edmund Burke sought to preserve British morality, civil society and political order, which he regarded as essentially healthy, from baleful Parisian ideas. The French revolutionaries wanted to perfect politics by eradicating tradition and transforming humanity. Burke replied that the British people were fine. Their traditions and communities nurtured political freedom, which gave tradition and community room to develop and flourish.

Reconciling freedom and tradition has since emerged as modern conservatism's perennial task. A little more than 150 years after Burke, the founders of the conservative movement in America renewed the relationship between the right and the people. William F. Buckley—a classical liberal devoted to self-government and free markets, and a traditionalist dedicated to morality anchored in Christianity—launched *National Review* in 1955 to safeguard the commitments to freedom and faith that he believed were alive and well among ordinary Americans.

In a 1985 essay for this newspaper, Irving Kristol distinguished “the new populism” from the populism America's founders feared, in which the people's passions “overwhelm the political and legal process by which our democracy has traditionally operated.” Inept conduct of the Vietnam War, overreaching courts, failing schools and a broken criminal justice system had shattered the people's confidence in the political elites. “The common sense—not the passion, but the common sense—of the American people has been outraged over the past 20 years,” Kristol wrote, “by the persistent un-wisdom of their elected and appointed officials.”

Today, the people are restive and in distress. The danger to their communities isn't distant and vague. It isn't lurking on the outskirts. It has breached the town walls. It has occupied neighborhoods and infiltrated homes.

Charles Murray explored this multifaceted crisis in his 2012 book “Coming Apart.” The lower-middle class is beset by plunging marriage rates, a rise in births to unwed mothers, erosion of men's industriousness, surging crime, and a steep decline in religious faith.

Culprits, particularly in the industrial heartland, include globalization, workplace automation and opioids. The contempt progressive elites heap on the lower middle class fuels indignation and resentment.

Preserving and reforming no longer suffice. To conserve, one must also restore. To restore America's beleaguered lower-middle-class communities—indeed, to earn the support of people throughout the nation, regardless of socioeconomic class—conservative elites must persuade the people that liberty and limited government advance the people's long-term interests. Conservative elites must listen more, and more carefully, to the people to better understand their aspirations, discontents and fears. This will aid in developing policies—informed by the principles of constitutional government—that address the people's immediate priorities, starting with good jobs, which are essential to healthy communities.

Sound policy is of little use if Americans don't understand the precepts of liberal democracy. A proper liberal education yields that understanding. To put it mildly, however, few American institutions of higher education transmit knowledge, and cultivate the spirit, of freedom. Rather, colleges and universities inculcate the practices and spirit of the tribalism that disfigures American politics.

Conservatives, therefore, must restore liberal education. That is a long-term undertaking. In the near term, conservatives should multiply the supplemental on- and off-campus programs they have already established to fill the college curriculum's gaping holes and counteract its illiberal lessons.

It's true that liberal education has always been the province of elites. It's also true that beginning with Burke, conservative elites have brought their learning to bear on behalf of the interest they share with the people in conserving freedom, including the freedom to conserve local community, national tradition and religious faith.

In this strange and remarkable moment, lively appreciation of modern conservatism's origins, major ideas and perennial task furnishes invaluable resources for understanding our politics and advancing the public interest.

Mr. Berkowitz is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. This is adapted from his Oct. 30 Wriston Lecture at the Manhattan Institute.

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