

Populism, Freedom, the National Interest, and the American Spirit

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The natural human propensity for clear and simple answers constantly tempts to false dichotomies and lopsided choices. Sometimes the complexity is clear. Should we develop our personal lives or our professional lives? Should we organize our finances with a view to the short term or the long term? Should we care for our bodies or cultivate our minds? In these cases, it easy to see that the answer is both; the hard part is coordinating, adjusting to circumstances, and striking the right balance. But what seems obvious when it comes to juggling the personal and the professional, handling money, and keeping body and mind in good order appears more elusive in politics.

In matters of public policy, governance, and justice, we seem bent on embracing a single principle to the exclusion of all others. The most conspicuous expression of this tendency in American politics is the stark division into two opposing camps, conservatives and progressives. The popular division encourages the misguided notion that conservatives have

no interest in innovation, protecting the environment, and providing for the needy, while progressives can do without preserving beliefs, practices, and institutions that have stood the test of time.

Conservatives should have an advantage in resisting the reduction of the complexities of politics to one clear-cut consideration. Since the traditions they seek to preserve are inevitably intricate and multifarious, conservatives constantly confront the imperative to reconcile the diverse interests, competing principles, and clashing aims that comprise our political and intellectual inheritance. Yet in recent years, prominent figures on the new right have insisted in the name of nationalism or the common good that Americans should jettison the modern principles of freedom. This is a quixotic endeavor not least because the American nation is in part constituted by convictions about inalienable human rights and government's paramount obligation to secure them.

In "The Liberal-Conservative Tug of War for the GOP," which appeared in late December in The Spectator, Daniel McCarthy comes down officially on the side of one-sidedness. But the strains in his argument unofficially suggest that the GOP must reweave the various elements – prominent among them the principles of freedom – out of which the American constitutional order was fashioned.

"For the last thirty years, the Republican Party has been a battleground between two competing ideologies," writes the Spectator contributing editor and columnist and Modern Age editor. "One of these is fundamentally liberal, although it is packaged and sold under a variety of brand names: 'compassionate conservatism,' neoconservatism, classical liberalism, and – most misleadingly – Reagan conservatism." The other ideology, the leading champions of which have been Pat Buchanan and Donald Trump, is called populism or nationalism. It represents "a rejection of modern liberalism and the post-Cold War elite consensus in American politics," according to McCarthy. "It is skeptical of free trade, large-scale immigration and US involvement in foreign conflicts."

The liberal idea within conservatism, McCarthy maintains, has benefitted from a "commanding advantage among the media and nonprofit institutions that shape Republican policy and rhetoric from the outside" as well as its "dominant place within the party." The good news from his perspective is that "liberal conservatism" has recently declined while nationalism has been on the upswing. This is due, in McCarthy's view, both to nationalism's intrinsic appeal and to the liberal outlook's ever more apparent deficiencies, particularly concerning economics and immigration.

Establishment conservatives have championed a "liberal economic program" that "was, and remains, suicidal for Republicans," McCarthy charges. Furthermore, "by favoring finance and technology over traditional industry, liberals opt for a college-educated workforce" that administration and faculty indoctrinate with progressive ideas.

No doubt conservatives have failed to strike an optimal balance in the economic realm. The answer, however, is not to embrace a false dichotomy between “finance and technology” and “traditional industry.” Nor is it to favor an uneducated work force over an educated one.

Rather, conservatives should devise policies that more effectively reconcile the nation’s interests in a smoothly functioning Wall Street and innovative Silicon Valley with its interests in a reindustrialized Rust Belt and a prosperous Sun Belt – all essential to a healthy 21st-century American economy. At the same time, the political branches should shift a significant proportion of taxpayer money from four-year universities that have transformed themselves into institutions for the transmission of progressive political values to community colleges and other educational enterprises that provide vocational training that translates into useful and well-paying jobs such as carpentry, welding, and other skilled blue-collar occupations. This will fortify the middle class and strengthen America’s industrial base without harming finance and technology, which are crucial to opportunity, growth, and national defense.

McCarthy’s scorn for establishment conservatives’ immigration policy also needlessly amplifies divisions. “The liberal-conservative attitude toward immigration shows the same self-destructive prioritization of ideology over real-world effects,” he laments. “Republicans celebrate whenever they make inroads into communities bolstered by recent immigrants – yet most immigrant communities vote by wide margins for the Democrats.” Ideology, however, appears to distort McCarthy’s allegations of ideological distortion. He rashly dismisses the substantial gains Republicans have made in recent years among Latino and Asian voters. Yet the combination of a strong pro-lawful immigration stance and opposition to affirmative action programs that discriminate against Asians shows promise of continuing to increase the conservative share of the immigrant vote.

His pessimism about winning over immigrants, moreover, exposes the deficiencies of McCarthy’s distinction between nationalism in America and economic freedom. Since “few immigrants come from countries with anything like the American right’s idea of freedom, and most see no contradiction between seeking entrepreneurial opportunities while also accepting expansive government services,” he contends, conservatives are bound to lose a bidding war with progressives, who can always offer more generous entitlement packages. That’s true about a bidding war, but it’s not a truth that derives from nationalism.

McCarthy’s opposition to government programs that foster dependency stems from classically liberal concerns that can be traced to John Locke, Adam Smith, and America’s founders. The modern tradition of freedom emphasizes government’s limited powers and the impairment of rights, harm to individual dignity, and costs to productivity caused by overstepping them. In the 1960s, contributors to the neoconservative magazine *The Public Interest* and free-market economists such as Milton Friedman – all of whom McCarthy effectively casts as betrayers of the true conservatism – criticized the excesses of New Deal and Great Society welfare programs for eroding incentives for work, undercutting productivity, and undermining individual responsibility and family structure.

Cutting through the polemics reveals that McCarthy's real objection is not to every form of liberalism but rather to narrow and partisan interpretations of the principles of freedom. But by reducing liberalism to the libertarian or progressive agenda, he warps a compelling message about freedom, responsibility, family, and community that conservatives can offer immigrants. He also hinders a proper understanding, and compelling defense, of the national spirit in America.

America's founding documents reflect the nation's commitment to universal principles. The Declaration of Independence proclaims the right of distinct peoples to govern themselves while also affirming that the just purpose of self-government is to secure rights shared equally by all. The Constitution expresses the considered reflections of "We the people" about the institutional arrangements, distribution of powers, and checks and balances best suited to obtaining for the American people the "blessings of liberty."

While there is a great deal more to America than dedication to the principles of individual freedom and human equality under law, the forms of freedom shape every aspect of the American experience. From language, attire, entertainment, and work to citizenship, friendship, family, and faith, Americans tend to give wide latitude under law to individuals to pursue their interests, to develop their talents, and to decide for themselves how to pursue their own good and contribute to the public interest. Although they often seem bent on deceiving themselves about their standards, America's most radical homegrown critics tend to appeal to the principles on which America's experiment in ordered liberty rests. They rarely reproach the United States for failing to establish a monarchy, aristocracy, or oligarchy and instead condemn it for leaving citizens unfree and unequal.

Members of the new right have done much to restore appreciation of the primacy of the national interest and the American spirit. They would enhance their contribution by grasping how the national interest and the American spirit are interwoven with the principles of freedom.

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