



UNDERSTANDING CONSERVATIVES

The Past, Present, and Uncertain Future of the Republican Party

By Donald T. Critchlow

Speaking to reporters on his campaign bus in New Hampshire in mid-2015, Jeb Bush, the early frontrunner for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination, admitted that he could not explain the sudden and unlikely success of two of his opponents. Bush, the son of the forty-first U.S. president and the brother of the forty-third, was not alone in his confusion. Donald Trump, a billionaire from New York who made his money in real estate, casinos, hotels, and reality television, and Ben Carson, a retired neurosurgeon who grew up in Detroit, had caught political pundits by surprise. In the months leading up to the first primaries in early 2016, the two candidates seemingly came out of nowhere to lead the polls among likely Republican voters. Both men brought to their campaigns sharp anti-politician rhetoric and rallied supporters with boasts that they had never been elected to political office. Instead, both claimed superior intelligence as a reason they should be elected to the highest office in the land, the U.S. presidency. Trump proclaimed that he knew how to “make deals” and therefore could clean up the immigration mess on the southern border, bring manufacturing jobs back from China, Japan, and Mexico, and deport the millions of undocumented workers in the country. Carson, far less vituperative on the campaign stump, pointed to his humble origins growing up as a poor African American who was on the verge of taking the wrong path until he found faith in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Without doubt, the Trump phenomenon is perplexing. Nothing quite like it has been seen in American presidential politics. Andrew Jackson won the presidency in 1828 rallying grassroots support, but he had previously been elected to public office and had been a commanding general. Similarly, Dwight D. Eisenhower stepped into the White House in 1953 without having held elected office, but as

◁ Rally for presidential candidate Donald Trump aboard the USS Iowa, Los Angeles, Sept. 15, 2015.
Mark Peterson/Redux

the Allied command general who had overseen the D-Day invasion during the Second World War, nobody doubted his administrative experience.

Clearly, outsiders like Trump struck a chord among segments of the Republican Party and the general electorate. This chord reflects deep anxieties about the nation. Trump's call for building a wall on the southern border to keep out undocumented Mexican and Central American immigrants and to ban all Muslims, until things are figured out, manifests an anxious electorate worried about the economy, national security, and the culture. Trump presents himself as a warrior protecting the border, restoring jobs, and reclaiming American power. He offers a nationalist message, quite similar to xenophobic politicians we are seeing across Europe, Putin's Russia, and China's ruling regime—all tapping into a message of restoring national greatness and protecting traditional values.

Carson has attracted a sizable following among Evangelical Protestants. In his speeches he uses Biblical language, even when talking about tax plans. Given that an estimated 40 percent of Republican primary voters identify themselves as Evangelical Christians, Carson's appeal is understandable. The remaining candidates in the Republican field—which at one point numbered seventeen, notably including U.S. Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, and U.S. Senator Marco Rubio of Florida—represent various and overlapping constituencies.

The Grand Old Party (GOP) stands as a voice of conservatism in America, but the cacophony among Republicans suggests that American conservatism is not monolithic. As historian Gregory L. Schneider and others have observed, modern American conservatism from its first appearance after the Second World War was a mixed bag of cultural traditions, libertarians, and some nut-cases. It is not surprising that there is dissonance within the Republican Party today. Any understanding of what is happening needs to begin with a recognition that modern conservatism has always reflected uneasy tensions between political pragmatism aimed at winning elections and governing, on the one hand; and high principles about individual freedom, the rule of law, and free enterprise, and fear of centralized government, on the other.

American Political Tradition

Modern conservatism as a political movement arose during Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s and took shape following the Second World War. But conservatism in the United States has deep roots in the American political tradition. These roots are found in a tradition of anti-statism, fear of centralized government, the importance of the written Constitution, and a belief that representative government rests ultimately on a virtuous citizenry. These deep strains within the American political tradition explain much about modern conservatism, and they belie scholars who

see modern American conservatism founded on expressions of paranoia, racism, and special interests related to corporate business. Within American conservatism, there were always a few who pandered to the worse fears of the people from subversive communists and illegal immigration, instead of offering well-considered policy solutions to actual issues. Trump's exploitation of the immigration issue stoked anxieties among a large segment of the electorate about the perceived cultural and economic decline of the nation.

A strong anti-statism sentiment prevailed in America from its founding as a nation, and modern conservatism reflected this fear of centralized government. Those who drafted the U.S. Constitution in 1787 brought to the Constitutional Convention a deep fear of centralized government based on their reading of John Locke and later English Whig political theorists. From their reading of political philosophy they feared power, the domination of some men by others. Power itself was a natural aspect of government and could only be made legitimate through a compact of mutual consent. History taught, they believed, that government power degenerated into tyranny, oligarchy, or mob rule. To prevent this, power needed to be distributed so that no one group, class, or single person could dominate others and strip citizens of their rights. As a result, the founders drafted a constitutional order that created a balance between the three branches of government—the legislative, judiciary, and executive.

The founders believed government remained essential to the maintenance of a well-ordered society. They saw government as an instrument for preserving liberty, but government itself, because of human nature, was easily given to corruption and tyranny. Government power, they maintained, was of two sorts: the power to coerce and the power to adjudicate. The founders envisioned the new federal government as serving as a referee in adjudicating the various sectional, economic, and social interests of the nation. This referee process came through the courts, upholding constitutional principles and a common law tradition; and through the legislature, in the American case, two bodies, a Senate and a House of Representatives, which represented, through elections, different interests. James Madison, one of the chief architects of the Constitution, argued in Federalist Paper Number 10 in favor of a large, extended commercial republic as the best way to protect individual liberty.

While the founders upheld the power of adjudication as the most important role for government, they understood that government also held coercive power. They sought to weaken this coercive power, but coercive power was necessary to national trade, immigration, relations with Native Americans, diplomatic relations with other nations, and the ability to wage war to protect the nation. Government could foster economic development through chartering and subsidizing private companies, while ensuring that the rule of law was maintained to prevent favoritism and corruption.

The importance of the Constitution to American politics cannot be overstated. Partisan politics emerged quickly in the early republic, and later in the 1860s the nation experienced a devastating civil war. As fierce as partisan division has been in the United States, there has been wide agreement that constitutional principles must be upheld, even though these principles might be interpreted differently. Early in George Washington's administration, partisan divisions broke out over the proper role for government within a constitutional framework. During the Civil War, both the North and the South maintained they were upholding constitutional principles as envisioned by the founders. Similarly today, partisan debate often comes down to constitutional challenges, which are adjudicated by the courts.

This tradition of anti-statism, fear of centralized government, and the importance of constitutional rule of law joins another strain within the American political tradition. The founders believed that in the end, whatever structures of government were crafted at the Constitutional Convention, ultimately the American republic rested on a virtuous, civic-informed, and active citizenry. This belief in the importance of civic republicanism came from the founders' reading of ancient philosophers and modern thinkers.

While some of the founders such as Thomas Jefferson were deists who did not believe in an active God intervening in human affairs, most of those who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 were Christians. Most were Protestants, with the exception of Charles Carroll, a Roman Catholic. These men saw religion, specifically Christianity, as necessary to maintaining an orderly society. As Protestants they opposed a national established church on the English model, but they did not believe in a high wall separating church and state, as James Madison wanted. Indeed, Congress instructed James Madison, the author of the First Amendment, to modify his first draft of the Bill of Rights because it erected, they believed, too high a wall separating church and state. Organized religion, they believed, was essential in fostering a virtuous and enlightened citizenry. Only in the late nineteenth century would state governments, and the Supreme Court in the postwar period, begin erecting a high wall separating church and state through the removal of prayer in public schools, the denial of expressions of religious faith in public places, and matters of religious conscience.

What Is a Conservative?

Given these tensions within the conservative tradition, the question arises: What is a conservative? One useful definition is offered by medieval historian Robert Stacey, who finds a long tradition in Western thought that upholds the conceptual notion that "government power rests on the free consent of its subjects; that governmental powers are inherently limited; and that governments must not intrude upon matters of private conscience." The issue is not whether modern American conservatives

have been consistent in their views or application of “limited government”—we know they have not—but the implications of this belief in how modern American conservatives view American history.

First, conservatives pride themselves on living in one of the wealthiest nations in the world today. Any calculation of the nation’s wealth should extend beyond measures of economic wellbeing to include a political, legal, religious, and cultural heritage. This heritage includes representative government, based on a constitution; the rule of law; religious tolerance; and an individualist ethos. This wealth—political, legal, religious, social, and cultural—rests at the core of America’s history as a nation. (Conservatives recognize that wealth and income inequality exists in American society, but they blame this on federal policies and crony capitalism in Washington.)

Conservatives of all stripes recognize that the promise of democracy, the rule of law, religious tolerance, and individual freedom has often gone unfulfilled in the nation’s history; and that it remains unfulfilled today. Conservatives believe, however, that the nation’s democratic aspirations are a genuine reflection of the very ethos of American society, and not just a rhetorical device to preserve class, racial, or social privilege. Because the nation perceived these aspirations to be genuine, these aspirations evolved into reality. Slavery and later racial segregation of public places were ended; women received the right to vote; civil liberties were preserved and extended. Many conservatives believe that a Divine Creator—God—endowed humans, as the Declaration of Independence claimed, with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Whether a Divine Creator actually endowed humans with these inalienable rights, though, is beside the point for conservatives. Acting on the belief that these rights are inalienable and cannot be taken away by any government led Americans in their history to act on these rights over the course of the next two hundred years to produce a democracy unparalleled in human history. Truly free markets may never have existed, yet the belief in a free market economy allowed economic wellbeing similarly unparalleled in history.

The striving to fulfill the promise often came with violent struggle, profound social and cultural discord, and disturbing social injustice. In this conflict, there was surprising agreement that democracy, the rule of law, religious tolerance, and individual rights were good things. Americans take such things for granted. At nearly every point of bitter social discord—debates over slavery, the Civil War, the rights of organized labor, the black civil rights movement, the treatment of Native Americans, women’s rights, the role of the federal government, war—conflict was consistently framed within a belief in a constitutional order embodied in the founder’s vision with long historic roots in a Western tradition. The framework created by early colonists and those who drafted the Constitution set a context that allowed great political, business, religious, and social leaders to emerge shaping the direction of the nation.

Thus for conservatives the real wealth of the nation rests in a realized and continued promise of a constitutional order and representational republic to fulfill the promise of liberty. This faith imparts an importance of individuals in shaping the nation's history and dismisses centralized government as the endower of rights or promoter of freedom.

One consequence of this faith is that conservatives have a different take on history than is found in many history textbooks that are used in America's classrooms. Instead of seeing the course of American history as a forward, albeit erratic, movement toward government expansion for the collective good, conservatives begin with an assumption that the erection of the modern liberal state with an enlarged federal bureaucracy is a historical anomaly. Conservatives see modern progressive reform, which most often finds expression during times of periodic social and economic crisis, as the exception and not the rule. Moreover, its manifestation, the growth of centralized government, reflects the desires and the hubris of self-anointed elites who think they know better than the unwashed masses what is good for them. Conservatives accuse modern progressives of standing outside a deep and popular sentiment and longstanding ideology that disdains centralized government, distrusts politicians whatever their party, and dislikes social planners. This depiction of elitism—found by conservatives in the federal government, the media, and universities—imparts a strong populist strain to grassroots conservatism that is finding expression in Republican politics today.

Ideas Have Consequences

From the time American conservatism took shape as a conscious political movement beginning in the late 1930s, it contained two strains—ideological principle and grassroots populism—which created tensions. Ideological purity, winning elections, and governing do not always go hand-in-hand. Progressive reform at the turn of the twentieth century and Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s sharply turned American politics away from a limited government philosophy. The response to the New Deal by the right was neither coherent nor well organized. Furthermore, it reflected a peculiar crankiness and eccentricity that thwarted any attempts to create a sustainable political movement. A disparate group of writers, ranging from New Humanists such as Harvard University professor Irving Babbitt, individualist Albert Jay Knock, journalist William Henry Chamberlin, and newspaper columnists Henry Hazlitt and John T. Flynn, inveighed against New Deal collectivism. Opposition to Roosevelt's interventionist policies to aid Britain against Nazi Germany following the outbreak of world war in 1939 provided momentum to the prewar right, at least until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. The non-interventionist movement expressed popular opinion that the United States should not be involved in European wars, but

isolationism attracted anti-Semitic and conspiracy cranks who remained prominent, to varying degrees, in some postwar rightwing circles.

In the postwar period, a small, unorganized band of intellectuals and writers provided a more systematic critique of the progressive state. Many of these intellectuals who rose to defend American principles of limited government and civic virtue were European émigrés who fled German fascism and Soviet communism. These intellectuals included novelists such as Ayn Rand, a Jewish Russian émigré, whose novel, *The Fountainhead*, published in 1943, became a bestseller. It tells the heroic story of a young architect, Howard Roark, who triumphs over the mediocrity of the masses found in big business and politics. Rand, who developed a philosophy of objectivism, acclaimed the virtues of individual selfishness that rejected the altruist ethos of the welfare state and regulated capitalism and Christianity. Many conservative intellectuals rejected Rand's philosophy and the cult of personality that developed around her, but her influence on the larger public and many businessmen was important for spreading the anti-collectivist message of the right.

Friedrich Hayek, an Austrian-born economist, who arrived in America in 1948 to assume a post at the University of Chicago, became an important voice against the collectivism he saw embodied in communism, socialism, and liberalism. Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* in 1945 became a bestseller in America after it was picked up by *Reader's Digest*, at that time the most widely circulated magazine in the country. At the University of Chicago, Hayek joined economists and other intellectuals such as Milton Friedman, Aaron Director, and Ronald Coase, who challenged Keynesian economics, the prevailing economic theory of liberalism. Meanwhile an array of other authors, including Russell Kirk, Richard Weaver, Ludwig von Mises, and Leo Strauss sought to resurrect the Western tradition against the collectivist state.

This intellectual counteroffensive coincided with the rise of a grassroots, popular anti-communist movement that reshaped the political landscape over the next four decades. Without the grassroots anti-communist movement in the early years of the Cold War these intellectuals might have been confined to a small circle. The confluence of the two added impetus to the political reaction to New Deal liberalism. The founding of the *National Review* by a young Yale University graduate, William F. Buckley, Jr., in 1955 gave voice to this intellectual movement and popular anti-communism. From the outset the *National Review* supported a strong American interventionist foreign policy. In this way, the magazine repudiated the earlier isolationist sentiment found in the prewar right. The magazine supported the restriction of civil liberties for avowed members of the Communist Party in the United States as agents of a foreign power, the Soviet Union. A Roman Catholic, Buckley called for a traditionalist morality and the conservation of standing cultural tradition.

The magazine's support of the Cold War, a strong military defense, and restrictions of civil liberties for communists caused some on the right to criticize Buckley and those around his magazine for betraying the conservative cause. These critics from the right of Buckley's traditionalist conservative principles came to call themselves libertarians. They found spokesmen such as economic historian Murray Rothbard and political philosopher Ronald Hamowy who asked, how could a true conservative support the erection of a military-industrial complex, necessary to an interventionist foreign policy, and the suppression of civil liberties, while calling for more limited government and individual rights? The division between the so-called traditionalists and the libertarian wings of the right characterized modern conservatism in America from its inception. Buckley tried to reconcile these two strains in the conservative movement in what he called "fusionism," the combining of traditionalist and libertarian principles of support for the free market, anti-collectivism, and a general acknowledgment that the Western tradition was important to maintain. Fusionism was embodied in Young Americans for Freedom, a conservative organization he formed with *National Review* publisher William Rusher in 1959. The organization provided a training ground for many young conservatives who became political strategists and operatives in the Republican Party.

Conservatives Take Over

If intellectuals within the conservative movement fought among themselves, Republicans at large found reconciling principle and practical politics difficult. This was apparent in the nomination of Dwight D. Eisenhower as the party's presidential candidate in 1952. After nearly a decade and a half of Democratic control of the White House, Republicans were anxious to regain control of the presidency. Conservatives within the party complained that the eastern wing of the party, which they alleged was controlled by Wall Street, had led the party to defeat by nominating "Republicans in name only" such as public utilities magnate Wendell Willkie in 1940 and New York Governor Thomas Dewey in 1944 and again in 1948. In 1952 a strong bloc within the party believed that the presidential nomination should go to a real conservative, Robert Taft, the U.S. senator from Ohio who had consistently opposed the New Deal. The conservative Taft wing of the party, however, failed when Eisenhower won the nomination. Eisenhower selected as his running mate the young California U.S. Senator Richard M. Nixon, who had gained national attention for his investigation of Soviet espionage in the nation's capital. Eisenhower's popularity throughout his eight years in office restrained overt criticism by conservatives of Eisenhower's policies. Still, within conservative ranks there were complaints that Eisenhower was a moderate at best. As conservatives saw it, he had not rolled back the New Deal; and

in foreign policy, Eisenhower had initiated a unilateral ban on atmospheric nuclear testing, failed to fully aid freedom fighters in the Soviet-controlled Eastern bloc, and invited Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to visit the United States.

After Nixon lost his bid for the White House in 1960 to Democrat John F. Kennedy, conservatives believed that their time would come in 1964. They found their ideal candidate in Barry Goldwater, a U.S. senator from Arizona. His book, *Conscience of a Conservative*, published in 1960, had become a bestseller. Ghostwritten by Buckley's brother-in-law Brent Bozell, this short manifesto articulated for the popular reader the conservative critique of the welfare regulatory state, and the need for a free market economy and a moral order. Goldwater entered the 1964 Republican primaries with great doubts about his chances to win the White House following the outpouring of national grief with Kennedy's assassination in 1963. Goldwater's main rival for the GOP nomination was Nelson Rockefeller, an heir to the John D. Rockefeller oil fortune who had been elected governor of New York in 1958. The Goldwater-Rockefeller contest was portrayed by conservatives as an ideological battle for the soul of the Republican Party. Conservatives opposed Rockefeller's support for the welfare state in domestic policy and downplayed his strong Cold War positions. The battle between the two wings also became a regional battle between the East and the rising Sun Belt region of the country. Goldwater won the nomination, but lost in a landslide to Kennedy's successor, incumbent president Lyndon B. Johnson. The nomination of Goldwater, however, marked the end of the major influence of the eastern wing of the GOP. Although moderate Republicans continued to be elected to Congress, their demise came in 1994 when Republicans led by conservative Newt Gingrich gained control of the House of Representatives for the first time since 1954.

Conservatives drew three major lessons from Goldwater's losing campaign. First, they learned that an avowed conservative could be nominated to head the party. The second lesson was that they could not count on a favorable media toward their candidate. The vicious attacks on Goldwater as a warmonger and a racist by the mainstream media confirmed to conservatives that the left controlled the media. The final lesson was that the South could be won by Republicans, as Goldwater showed in winning six southern states.

From Goldwater onwards, every candidate seeking the GOP nomination has had to campaign with the conservative label. In 1968, Nixon ran as a candidate strong on law and order and national defense. Once in office, however, Nixon pursued policies that expanded the welfare and regulatory state, and in foreign policy pursued détente with the Soviet Union, signed the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) arms control agreement, and opened relations with China. Discontented conservatives

mounted a quixotic attempt to defeat Nixon for the nomination in 1972, but utterly failed in challenging a standing president. Conservatives felt betrayed by Nixon and one consequence was the emergence of a general sentiment that politicians claiming to be conservative could not always be trusted.

Nixon's resignation from the presidency in 1974 amid the Watergate scandal left the GOP devastated. Republicans were annihilated in the midterm elections in 1974. The so-called "Watergate baby" Democrats elected in 1974 tended to be liberal and highly partisan. They signaled the first signs of growing polarization in Congress and the electorate. At the time, less than 20 percent of the electorate identified themselves as Republican. Conservatives were a minority within a minority party.

Conservatives finally gained the White House when Ronald Reagan, a former California governor and Hollywood actor, defeated incumbent Democrat Jimmy Carter in 1980. Reagan became the icon of the GOP and conservatives. Reagan's election can be attributed to a specific set of circumstances, his political skills as an orator who was able to convey a conservative message to the larger public, and the party's ability to expand its constituent base. The inability of the Carter administration to address high unemployment and raging inflation, not to mention the Iran hostage crisis that haunted Carter's campaign, doomed his reelection. Reagan's principled pragmatism as a conservative and a politician characterized his candidacy and his presidency. He managed to work with Democrats in Congress to achieve many of his domestic goals, including tax cuts, tax simplification, and Social Security reform. Reagan brought core principles, political skill, and an affability in achieving his primary agenda of cutting taxes and strengthening national defense.

Reagan's presidency marked a triumph for conservatives. They had reached the sight of the Promised Land, but the march was far from over. The Republican Party had been turned into a voice of conservatism, but more internal battles were still to come. With Republican presidential candidates now required to declare themselves as conservatives, this meant standing on the three pillars of conservatism: minimum centralized government; the free market; and traditional moral values. How such aspirations translated into actual governance, winning elections, and meaningful public policies caused pitched battles within the Republican Party and ensured tensions between politicians charged with representing larger constituencies and governing and grassroots activists, often motivated by pristine principles.

Democratic Revival

George H.W. Bush's presidency presents a case in point. After winning election as Reagan's successor in the White House, Bush distanced himself from hardcore conservatives. His closest advisors in the administration—for example, his chief-of-staff

John Sununu—were moderate Republicans. Bush sought a “kinder, gentler America,” in contrast with Reagan’s appearance as uncaring. Reagan conservatives were isolated in Bush’s administration or run out by Bush appointees. In the end, the Bush administration pushed through legislation that raised taxes, expanded civil rights and health benefits to the physically and mentally disabled, and expanded the regulatory state. His diplomatic and military success in the first Gulf War were not enough, however, to win reelection to the White House. He was defeated by a then relatively unknown centrist governor from Arkansas, Democrat Bill Clinton, whose campaign took advantage of a recession and Bush’s inability to connect with many average Americans.

The Clinton presidency itself moved to the right, especially after Republicans swept the midterm elections and won control of Congress in 1994. The Clinton administration joined congressional Republicans in enacting welfare and tax reform and balancing the federal budget. Clinton’s political success led to his reelection in 1996 against an especially weak Republican opponent, Senator Bob Dole of Kansas. Clinton’s move to the center and assuming much of the Republican agenda left conservatives in disarray without a counter agenda. A scandal about Clinton’s involvement with a White House intern enabled George W. Bush to raise the character issue in the 2000 presidential contest. He defeated Al Gore, Clinton’s vice president, in one of the closest presidential elections in American history. Bush’s representation of himself as a “conservative with a heart” revealed the problems faced by a conservative movement that called for smaller government. Bush’s conservatism, in effect, admitted that an enlarged federal government and entitlement programs such as Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and welfare were here to stay. The terrorist attacks on September 11 helped ensure his reelection.

Changing Narratives

Any new narrative of modern American conservatism needs to acknowledge that conservatism as well as liberalism have changed over time. Differences were already apparent in the conservatism of Goldwater and the conservatism of Reagan. When Reagan ran for governor in 1966, he looked toward Goldwater as a mentor. When Reagan decided to challenge incumbent Republican President Gerald R. Ford for the Republican nomination in 1976, however, relations between the two men grew tense. These tensions heightened when Reagan began criticizing Ford for entering into negotiations to hand the Panama Canal over to the Panamanian government. Goldwater worried that Reagan’s statements could “needlessly lead this country into open conflict.” When Goldwater endorsed Ford for the presidency, Reagan broke completely with Goldwater. He did not correspond with his former ally and mentor for fifteen months.

More importantly, Reagan mobilized social conservatives concerned about abortion, feminism, and changing sexual mores. Goldwater, for his part, despised the so-called religious right. He was not a social conservative and by the 1980s believed the religious right was destroying the Republican Party. Goldwater, once he left the Senate, became a strong advocate of abortion and gay rights—placing him at odds with many in the Republican Party.

Similarly, liberalism underwent important changes, especially in the late 1960s and 1970s when the New Deal political coalition began to break up. An understanding of conservatism must recognize the leftward shift of the Democratic Party that began when Senator George McGovern of South Dakota won the party's presidential nomination in 1972. These changes were not only political but ideological, as new progressive activists challenged traditional liberals within the Democratic Party. The older liberal tradition as it emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century primarily sought to address the ills of industrial capitalism. The new progressivism expressed concerns about the problems of an affluent post-industrial society. The new progressives disparaged consumption and deprecated corporate capitalism. As a result, they condemned both Western industrial democracy and the industrial socialism of the Soviet Union. They espoused community control, direct democracy, and anti-market solutions. There was a marked tendency to romanticize nature and to deride affluence and consumption.

This vision was founded not on a coherent philosophical system, but a shared anxiety about postwar America and its wasteful affluence. The wave of activism that emerged in the 1960s became institutionalized in the 1970s. Activists spoke the language of social justice and equality, which expressed a long reformist tradition in America, but their general concerns were less with the problems of production than the problems of consumerism. Barack Obama drew on this new progressive sentiment when he defeated Republican opponent Senator John McCain of Arizona for the presidency in 2008. Obama's status as the first biracial candidate nominated by a major party had natural appeal to progressives within the Democratic Party and among a general public anxious to move beyond the racial politics of the past. In a well-organized and well-financed campaign, he tapped into antiwar and anti-Bush sentiment within the electorate.

Search for Identity

Entering the White House after the worst financial crisis since 1929, Obama oversaw the bailout of Chrysler and General Motors, the enactment of a huge economic stimulus bill, which was followed by a compulsory health insurance plan, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. The act never gained support within the general

public, but Democrats had won control of Congress. Reflective of this anger toward the bailout, the stimulus, and especially the healthcare legislation, there emerged a spontaneous conservative grassroots movement, calling itself the Tea Party. The Tea Party is a diverse movement on the national, state, and local levels, composed of various state leaders and supporters who are primarily white, above average in income and education. An early icon of the movement was Sarah Palin, the former Alaska governor who had shot to prominence when McCain selected her to be his vice presidential running mate. This movement helped propel Republican gains in the 2010 midterms, when the party won sixty-three seats in the House of Representatives and six seats in the Senate. Divided government led to gridlock. Although Obama won reelection to the presidency in 2012, Democrats kept control of the Senate and Republicans the House. Republicans continued to make gains in state and local elections. By November 2015, Republicans controlled both chambers in state legislatures in all but eleven states; and held control of governorships in thirty of the fifty states. The math is staggering: representatives in state houses across the country affiliated with the Republican Party number 3,018 members, or 55 percent, compared to 2,336 Democrats, or 43 percent. The long-term consequences of this are profound. Republicans are building a strong bench for the future.

By expanding the party to include the growing Hispanic and minority population in America, young voters, and women, Democratic strategists maintain that the future is theirs in the long run. Furthermore, Democrats believe that they have a lock on the electoral college with large electoral votes in the Northeast U.S. and the West Coast. But white voters still account for over 70 percent of the voting electorate, and most of these white voters, male and female, married and single, are casting ballots for Republicans. Older voters are voting Republican as well. While a party in the long run cannot build around older voters, in the short run older voters can win elections, especially midterm elections, because they turn out to vote in large numbers.

Democrats are going to have a tough time regaining the House of Representatives in the near future, or even the Senate, unless there is a wave election, which sweeps them into office. This seems highly improbable. Given the deep polarization within the electorate, and discontent that more than 70 percent of Americans feel about the direction of the country, it is unlikely that Democrats, after controlling the White House for eight years, can translate this anxiety into a landslide election in their favor in 2016.

Yet, the Democrats may have a secret weapon: turmoil in the Republican Party. Republican voters appear angry, yet unable to direct their emotions in support of a single candidate. The resulting rise of outsiders has thrown more traditional candidates off balance. Any winning Republican candidate will have to unite a party still in search of its identity. But conservatives have proved to be a quarrelsome lot.