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Recommended Citation

Michael Espinoza (2021) Donald Trump's Impact on the Republican Party, Policy Studies, DOI: 10.1080/01442872.2021.1950667

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word count: 8,599

Donald Trump's impact on the Republican Party

Abstract: What impact did Donald Trump have on the Republican Party during his time as President? This article argues that although the presidency of Donald Trump was a natural progression of Republican conservatism, his legacy has cast a shadow on the Republican Party, as well as having further pushed the party rightward, whilst also helping to move the fringe/more extreme elements of Republican conservatism closer to the centre of American politics. As a result, the GOP has become increasingly dependent on a base of white support. Continuing along this path will only further put them at odds with a majority of the country and less likely to realise electoral victories. Only by a continued abating of democracy through compromises in the design of representative institutions and electoral practices will they be likely to win or retain power.

Keywords: Donald Trump, Evolution of Republican Conservatism, Anti-Democratic, Anti-Establishment, Right-Wing, Political Legacy

Introduction

What impact did Donald Trump have on the Republican Party during his time as President?

What will the lasting impact of Donald Trump be? Will the Grand Old Party (GOP) remain in his shadow, or will Republicans forge a different path without Trump? Whilst turning the page from Trump may make electoral sense in the long run – given the growing importance of the minority vote in the United States of America – the base of the party was very loyal to him after the election, and it is hard to overlook or ignore such a loyal constituency to the former president (Page and Elbeshbishi 2021; Quinnipiac University Poll 2021).

Trump's presidential campaign and one term as president may seem like a challenge or takeover of the Republican Party – which it is to some extent, at least in the short term – but what he stated and represented as a candidate and president was already present within the GOP.

The conservative evolution and takeover of the party was well underway before Trump's nomination, and the movement's values/beliefs overlapped with what Trump had espoused, especially the Tea Party Republicans, his political base of support in Congress. The GOP was at a crossroads after the 2020 defeat and needed to decide if conservatism will uphold democracy or move it back towards a republic that is increasingly anti-democratic.¹

This article argues that Donald Trump has helped to push the GOP further rightward, so that it has become an increasingly angry white party that is hostile towards democracy. It centres on how Republican conservatism evolved and built a platform for anti-establishment/right-wing conservatives. This laid a foundation of rage and paranoia for Trump's dogma, and his lying and disinformation that manifested into an assault against elections and democracy. This article contributes to the special issue (James 2021) and literature on the impact of the Trump presidency by exploring Trump's impact on the Republican presidency, the GOP and Republican conservatism.

The evolution of Republican conservatism

It is difficult to point to a single event that launched the evolution of Republican conservatism; however, it began to gain traction with the conservative response to Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal. The New Deal legislation of 1933 (the first New Deal) gave birth to the modern American welfare state – a much larger and hands on domestic government role over the American public. The birth of the welfare state marked the New Deal legacy – the New Deal and further additions to the welfare state, for example the second New Deal and social security as well as the Great Society and Medicare. The rise of the New Deal and the modern American welfare state in 1933 has also guided the evolution of GOP conservatism. Important figures in

¹ Back towards a republic can also be viewed from a similar argument as attempting to have sustained minority rule. For more, see Hacker and Pierson (2020), *Let Them Eat Tweets*, 12-13, 172-175, 187-188, 213-214.

the evolution of Republican conservatism have included Herbert Hoover, Robert A. Taft, William F. Buckley, Barry Goldwater, Phyllis Schlafly, Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich, and George W. Bush. The original GOP conservative critique against the New Deal legacy was an economic argument, but as socio-morals gained importance in the 1960s and 1970s, the conservative critique of contemporary times became primarily one of culture – combining a larger government role in socio-morals affairs (for example, abortion and gay marriage), with a more hands off government approach in economic affairs (for example, tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy) (Espinoza 2016).

GOP conservatism gradually took over the Republican Party. As conservatives were evolving and responding to the New Deal legacy, they were also combating liberal and especially moderate Republicans for control of the GOP (Schneider 2009; Critchlow 2011; Kabaservice 2012; Richardson 2014). The most recent incarnation of GOP conservatism has been the Tea Party, which has helped pave the path for Trump’s one term as president.

The Tea Party platform

In many ways, Trump owes his time in the GOP spotlight to the Tea Party. His hyper-partisan rhetoric, lack of care for the nuance of governing, his focus on policy proposals that appealed his base but, more often than not, lacked substantive policy goals other than to achieve the conservative agenda in any given situation, was straight out of the Tea Party’s reactionary playbook (Gervais and Morris 2018).

Although Bryan Gervais and Irwin Morris focused only on the House of Representatives, what their research revealed was illuminating. When analyzing House Republicans in the 112th and 113th Congresses, they noted the overall popularity of the Tea Party, how the Tea Party was more conservative “on racial and social issues”, and even how the Tea Party was surprisingly

“skilled at legislating” and “enjoyed some institutional cachet” than previously assumed (245-247). Moreover, Gervais and Morris went on to address how:

It was the choice of Eric Cantor, Paul Ryan, and Kevin McCarthy, aspiring to leadership positions in a Republican-controlled Congress, to encourage and recruit Tea Party-esque members in the lead up to the 2010 midterm elections.... And it was a choice not to more directly and forcefully confront a rising populist, ethno-nationalist tide that would overtake the party (248).

And it was that tide that Donald Trump rode in on, one that the current GOP House leader, Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) was also trying to navigate after the 2020 defeat. There were also Tea Party Republicans in the Senate who adhered to a confrontational style that caused issues for the Senate Republican leadership (Therriault 2013).

Whilst inflammatory partisan rhetoric can be good for energising the base and campaigning against, for example, the Affordable Care Act, it does not lead to an effective governing strategy. This effectively sums up the Trump presidency, strong on rhetorical flair, but lacking in substantial legislative achievements other than tax cuts for the wealthy. Overall, the Republican Party used asymmetrically polarising rhetoric, which bound the party together, but also made it less flexible when governing in comparison to the Democratic Party (Mann and Ornstein 2012; Grossman and Hopkins 2015).

Whilst the Tea Party formed Trump’s congressional base, it also held preceding positions similar to Trump’s, such as: the repealing of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), cracking down on illegal immigration and securing the border with Mexico (including a border wall), supporting socio-moral values (abortion and gay marriage), hostility towards Muslims and Islam, concerns of the undeserving getting undeserved benefits, questioning the legitimacy of an Obama presidency (with Trump as a ringleader), and polarising rhetoric (Skocpol and Williamson 2012); as well as the view that racial minorities are changing and threatening to damage the country and

set it on the course towards a socialist America (Parker and Barreto, chapter four, 4). The similarities between the Tea Party and Trump can make it seem as if the Tea Party simply “mutated” into Trump (Kabaservice 2020).

Mutation was a valid assertion, given that the Tea Party and Trump shared views that adhered to the paranoid style in American politics as written by Richard Hofstadter (Skocpol and Williamson 2012, 78; Parker and Barreto 2013, introduction, 2-3; Horwitz 2013, 157-201). Moreover, this paranoia has driven the evolution of Republican conservatism since the New Deal era (Espinoza 2016, 234-236).

The right-wing: paranoia and anti-establishment

In his writings on the American right-wing (1965), Richard Hofstadter was drawn to the links between paranoia and conspiracy (Wilentz 2020, 496). However, whilst Hofstadter focused on the John Birch Society, McCarthyism, and especially Barry Goldwater – it could also be written for the Tea Party and Donald Trump. Hofstadter viewed the belief of persecution as central to the paranoid style,

and it is indeed systemized in grandiose theories of conspiracy. But there is a vital difference between the paranoid spokesman in politics and the clinical paranoiac . . . the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically *against him*; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself but millions of others (503-504).

However, Trump’s paranoid style *was a combination of both, against himself and the United States of America*. Alisa Kessel agreed and labelled the difference as Trump’s own “Trumpian Style” (Kessel 2020, 50-52). Regarding paranoia, Trump was obsessed with the claim that he won the legal popular vote for the presidential election 2016 (Wootson 2016), and later claimed that any attempt to challenge his credibility and refute his assertion(s) would undermine him. Examples included, an investigation concerning possible collusion between the Trump campaign

and Russia (Chinoy, Mah, and Thompson 2018), as well as two impeachment trials as personal “witch hunts” (Scott and Burton 2019; Gearan 2021). If Trump was not adhering to the paranoid style, then he was at least following the narcissist style.² Furthermore, Trump believed that he won the 2020 presidential election and encouraged a mob to storm the capital to take back the election steal that robbed him of his victory, and robbed the country of its rightful president (Rucker et al. 2020; Gearan 2021). This was beyond paranoia, and this fringe/right-wing/anti-establishment has the potential to become the norm for the GOP.

To the delight of the right-wing and the Republican Party, conservatism has evolved and successfully taken control of the GOP. It is worth noting how what was considered right-wing in the 1950’s with McCarthyism and the John Birch Society, as well with Barry Goldwater’s presidential candidacy in 1964 would now be considered the political centre (or the mainstream) of the Republican Party as it is has lurched rightward (Plotke 2002 [second printing 2008], xxviii–xxxiii).³

At the core of pseudo-conservatism was a challenge to the establishment, and Trump built his campaign on being an anti-establishment conservative – which was more due to convenience than ideological conviction. He challenged the party establishment as he won the GOP primary contest and then the general election in 2016.⁴

As Republican conservatism has evolved, it is always the right-wing/anti-establishment that challenges the mainstream/establishment – whether it is moderates or mainstream conservatism (by comparison). Although Trump has challenged the Republican establishment, he was

² For a working definition, I will refer to the Mayo Clinic, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/narcissistic-personality-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20366662> (Narcissistic personality disorder 2017).

³ Table one provides a good visual of the gradual right-ward shift over a forty-year period (1960s-1990s), xxxii.

⁴ However, Trump’s anti-establishment and anti-elite approach did put him at odds with the GOP at the elite level. For more see, Saldin and Telles (2020), *Never Trump*.

following in the footsteps of past anti-establishment figures, such as Barry Goldwater and Newt Gingrich, as well as groups like the Tea Party.

From a political sociological perspective, Robert Horwitz posits how the anti-establishment right-wing is now the driving force behind Republican conservatism and the GOP. The Tea Party took over the mantle of Hofstadter's paranoid style and made it the driving force behind its rise, and as Horwitz noted, the Tea Party tapped into the "constant undercurrent of conspiracy and paranoia in American political culture", which was evident in the Tea Party's concern over the legitimacy of Barack Obama's presidency (167). Trump also encouraged the Tea Party paranoia, for example in his dogged pursuit to discredit Obama's birth certificate, and then fine-tuned the message to suit his needs.

However, although Trump followed the footsteps of the conservative right-wing, he also forged new ground regarding ideological flexibility, whilst pursuing a strategy that benefitted himself primarily and the party secondarily. To D. J. Mulloy, the foundations of Trump's strategy were well laid within the "radical elements" of the GOP and the conservative media for over four decades, and relied on "intransigence, belligerence, dog-whistle politics, demonization of 'the Other,' and a generalized assault on Washington and the very utility of government itself..." (182). Furthermore, Mulloy made a valid point when articulating that Trump was adhering to conventional radical right doctrine in two ways. Firstly, in supporting the mantra of "lower taxes, smaller government, less regulations, less bureaucracy, and fewer regulations" (183); and secondly, in the

"manner of his politics and his style: in his proclivity for the conspiratorial and appeal to the populist; in his extreme rhetoric and reliance on the strategy of 'Multiple Untruth' (à la Senator McCarthy); in his tendency toward the demagogic and his subtle—and not so subtle—racism; in his apparent contempt for the normal rules of democratic politics; and in his desire to turn back the clock in order to 'Make America Great Again'" (184).

The right-wing actions and rhetoric that Trump embodied imitated those of the Tea Party. These actions and rhetoric are increasingly embracing anti-democratic ideals to frame the narrative, no matter the consequences – even at the expense of the truth and democracy.

The conservative echo chamber: lying, disinformation and anti-democratic ideals

Trump's lies, supposedly "alternative facts", were trumpeted via the conservative media as part of its echo chamber – especially via AM/FM talk radio, Regnery Publishing and Fox News (Jamieson and Capella 2010; Hemmer 2016; Stelter 2020). A strong conservative platform to broadcast the message was a benefit for the GOP and for Trump. However, whilst it parroted a narrative that conveniently benefited Trump, there was also a major downside to the conservative media, especially Fox News, seemingly working on behalf of the Trump administration (Stelter 2020). The conservative media was reluctant to challenge the Trump narrative on a consistent basis, and as a result became more of a bullhorn, spreading falsehoods to its followers (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018, 147-187, 322-339). This was important to note because whereas Democrats tended to get information from a more variety of outlets, Republican voters increasingly relied on a few "trusted" outlets, and the first and most trusted source was Fox News (Jurkowitz et al. 2020).

This is not to suggest that politicians never lie, but the level at which Trump lied has undermined American democracy.⁵ One of the few congressional Republicans willing to challenge Trump's disregard of the truth as dangerous, Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY) warned that "Remaining silent, and ignoring the lie, emboldens the liar" (Cheney 2021). Moreover, Trump

⁵ For a perspective on American democracy after Trump, see Foa and Mounk (2021), this issue.

employed lies as a way of displaying power and ensuring loyalty within the GOP and amongst any subordinates (Pfiffner 2020). In the view of James Pfiffner,

Trump's refusal to admit the truth of widely accepted facts corrodes political discourse and is consistent with the practice of many authoritarian leaders. The assertion of the power to define reality by ignoring inconvenient facts is destructive of democratic governance. Donald Trump's false statements about politics and policy strike at the very heart of democracy. If there are no agreed upon facts, then it becomes impossible for people to make judgments about their government or hold it accountable (35).

Trump's reluctance to admit he was wrong and double down on his lies are part of a strategy, one that relied on persona and allowing for lies (or post-truths) to challenge an opposing narrative (usually the liberal media).⁶ In this reality, Trump was the saviour who had created a spectacle where he was the main attraction and where he had all the answers that could "Make America Great Again" (Reyes 2020). A good example of the power of Trump's deceitfulness was noted by Susan Glasser about Trump's 2016 presidential campaign:

When we assigned a team of reporters at *Politico* during the primary season to listen to every single word of Trump's speeches, we found that he offered a lie, half-truth, or outright exaggeration approximately once every five minutes—for an entire week. And it didn't hinder him in the least from winning the Republican presidential nomination. Not only that, when we repeated the exercise this fall, in the midst of the general election campaign, Trump had progressed to fibs of various magnitudes just about once every three minutes!... So not only did Trump think he was entitled to his own facts, so did his supporters. It didn't stop them at all from voting for him (Glasser 2016).

Moreover, when the conservative media did not sufficiently challenge Trump's lies it was, by default, defending the lies as being true. Whilst it is possible to help challenge fake news with factual corrections, Republicans did not attempt to challenge Trump's lies to an equal amount when compared to other members within the GOP (Porter and Wood 2019). Trump's lies also helped to frame a rhetorical narrative where he presented himself as a populist fighting on behalf of the American public (Reyes 2020).

⁶ For more on Trump and post-truth politics, see Hodson (2021), this issue.

If Trump is a populist, then it is worth considering that elements of his populism are based on how he addresses cultural identity, chaos (alternative facts), and nationalism (Grossberg 2018, 114-142). From a cultural studies perspective, Lawrence Grossberg is of the notion that “Trump’s politics are cultural: the problem space is reconstructed so that matters of both economics (reduced largely to the lived immediacy of jobs and taxes) and democracy (the relations between majorities and minorities) are displaced into the relations of nationality difference, and political polarization is translated into cultural polarization” (115).

Furthermore, Trump’s cultural conservatism played a vital role in his gaining support amongst Republican voters for his presidential election victory in 2016 (Bartels 2018); and within the cultural argument, one should also consider how race and ethnicity influenced whether a vote was cast for Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2017, 39-40).

If we move forward with the premise that Trump’s populism was wrapped up in culture and nationalism and rails against a multicultural and liberal America, then Trump followed along a nationalist populist tone set against liberal democracy (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). National populism follows a trend, according to Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, that is “a set of four deep-rooted societal changes which are cause for growing concern in the West” (xxi); and the four changes are centred on the “Four D’s” of distrust, destruction, deprivation and de-alignment (xxi-xxiii). Moreover, the “Four D’s” sum up Trump’s two presidential campaigns and one term as president – he thrived on challenging the system and status quo, relying on the vulnerabilities of his opposition to convey strength and conviction. A strength and conviction that can, based on what has been discussed above in this section, be described by Michael Kazin as a version of populism “in the racialist-nationalist tradition” in a similar fashion as George Wallace and the Ku Klux Klan (Kazin 2017, xiv-xv).

How Trump capitalised on race and rage

Race has both unified and divided the parties, and Trump benefited from this in his 2016 election victory. However, it can be argued that the unifying justification of white voters voting for Trump was economic insecurities, rather than racial resentment (Abramowitz 2018). On the other hand, the wide disparities in racial voting, especially white and black, is due to social sorting that began with how the parties responded to Civil Rights – when African Americans became more loyal to the Democratic Party, whilst white voters did the opposite and became more loyal to the Republican Party (Mason 2018, 32-38).

Moreover, according to Lilliana Mason, “Trump’s [2016] campaign did not tear the Republican Party apart; he spoke directly to the social groups that have aligned with the Republican Party in recent years, and he did so with little real policy content” and instead relied on rage (Mason 2018, 80). In other words, if racial views did not initially drive a voter to support Trump, their economic insecurities pushed or drove them to a similar conclusion – that they were losing their country (America) and wanted someone to stand up for them. What Trump was able to achieve by his implantation and implementation of uncivility was to drive a wedge and thus separate the “American electorate ... into identity-based groups” (Mason 2018, 127). That belief which can also be phrased as “negative partisanship” has fuelled the racial divide between the parties (Abramowitz 2018, 5-9). Furthermore, Alan Abramowitz rightly posited that “the growing racial divide set the stage for the rise of Donald Trump, who appealed to white racial resentment more openly than any major-party nominee in the post-war era” (9). That appeal was also evident during the capital insurrection on 6 January 2021 (Pape 2021).

Trump’s rhetoric appealed to many white Americans, especially where race and resentment or fear was linked to America’s decline. However, whilst Trump’s presidential election victory in 2016 can in part be linked to the nationalized voting behaviour of non-college educated white

voters that helped propel him into the White House (Hopkins 2018, 53-55), the other part of white Trump supporters' more nationalized voting behaviour ties into the perception of losing white privilege and the opportunities that go along with it. Trump was able to unite white voters, according to Sophie Bjork-James, due to how he “successfully merged fear of economic and racial change”, and brought together two white blocs of support, evangelicals and white nationalists behind his “nationalist credo” of Americanism, as part of American First and Make America Great Again (Bjork-James 2020, 43).⁷ An alternative and reasonable perspective considered Trump’s rhetoric and actions as “white protectionism” in the guise of “racial conservatism” (Smith and King 2021), but especially given what transpired after the 2020 election - the vote fraud myth and new voter integrity laws - white protectionism could also be viewed as antagonistic (if not overtly oppressive) to the growing minority population.

The loss of privilege was a driving force behind the mantra “Make America Great Again”. However, his choice of rhetoric also triggered an emotional response that can send people into a “white rage” that is nonsensical and racist (Ott and Dickinson 2019, 31). Trump’s rhetoric also triggered a “white rage” amongst Trump supporters on 6 January 2021, with the attempt to stop a legitimate and democratic certification of the 2020 presidential election results. That particular trigger could be traced to the belief/fear that whites are being replaced as the dominant population demographic in America, a theory which white nationalists view as the “Great Replacement” (Pape 2021). Part of white rage is a concern over the loss of privilege (Dietrich 2014), which is why the appeal to “Make America Great Again” had racist undertones. Race was also an important factor in Alt-Right attempts to be the latest to influence Republican conservatism – and Donald Trump.

⁷ For more on the dark history of American First, see Sarah Churchwell (2018), *Behold, America*; Rory McVeigh and Kevin Estep (2019), *The Politics of Losing*.

Trump and the Alt-Right

The Alt-Right helped Trump link his “Make America Great Again” slogan with a populist rhetoric that both embodied nationalistic undertones and appealed to white Americans (Mulloy 2018, 173-177, 184-185; McVeigh and Estep 2019). Much like Trump, the Alt-Right wanted to take over Republican conservatism – and the GOP – for its own benefit.

George Hawley posited that “[w]hereas earlier right-wing critics wanted a seat at the conservative table, the Alt-Right wants to displace conservatism entirely and bring a new brand of right-wing politics into the mainstream” (Hawley 2017, 7). One major problem that hindered the desire of the Alt-Right to take over Republican conservatism is that it was mostly an online movement, although Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign victory helped inspire it to create an offline existence; and the most memorable (as well as horrific) was the August 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The Alt-Right’s online-based presence, according to Cas Mudde (2019), “sets the ‘alt-right’ apart from other ‘far-right’ subcultures” (60-61).

The Alt-Right’s second major problem was that it tried to go after two main targets, the conservative mainstream/establishment and an increasingly multicultural America as well as the American left (Hawley 2017, 91). It was difficult to challenge and defeat two opponents simultaneously, which is why the Alt-Right decided to challenge establishment conservatism first. According to Hawley, “the Alt-Right wants the Republican Party to embrace the hard right and push transparent white identity politics” (93); and furthermore, “[t]he general Alt-Right critique of conservatism can be summed up as follows: white people are the predominant constituents of conservative politics, but conservatives in power rarely promote white interests” (94). It is unlikely that support for white ethnic or nationalist tendencies will be eradicated in the

near future as America becomes even more diverse (McVeigh and Estep 2019, 201-220; Marcy 2020).

White ethnic nationalism was a link between race, rage and Trump that mirrored the Alt-Right, for race and racial hostilities were very important to Trump's campaign and presidency. However, it must be considered that Trump's rhetoric also supported "white rage" that the GOP, and especially the Tea Party, espoused during the Obama presidency. Moreover, "white rage" has been focused on either preventing, challenging or rolling back African American voting rights – and the quest for "full and equal citizenship" – since the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 (Anderson 2016).

Whilst it may be accurate to state that Trump was not an active member or supporter of the Alt-Right, his rhetoric mirrored that of right-wing populists (Diamond 1995; Berlet and Lyons 2000; Reyes 2020, 870-872; Wodak, 2021), which presented common cause with the Alt-Right and helped it move closer to the mainstream of conservative Republicanism (Hawley 2017, 128-133; Mudde 2019, 164-165), picking up where the Tea Party left off (Skocpol and Williamson 2012, 155-188; Parker and Barreto 2013). Trump's rhetoric and Trump himself has therefore cast a shadow over the GOP that will influence the party for the foreseeable future. The question is, when will it disappear? The answer is open-ended and depends on how long Republicans overall and conservatives in general elect to fit his silhouette. Trump will not relinquish his influence without a fight – for he is determined to keep the GOP subservient and firmly in his shadow for as long as possible. And there are enough Republicans who seem determined to pledge allegiance to Trump first and the GOP second, as well as a lack of congressional leadership to push back against this development, further encouraging his supporters.

Electoral strategy

Trump's time as a candidate and president has left a mark on the Republican Party, as well as on the norms of American democracy. He was also able to benefit from the fringe/more extreme elements of the American right moving closer to the political centre. The problem is what this represents, as well as the issues that arise from such a scenario. Republican conservatism has increasingly benefitted from the un-democratic aspects of American elections (Millhiser 2021). In presidential elections, the Electoral College has benefited Republicans over Democrats. Even though Democrats have won five of the last six popular votes, Republicans have won three of the last six presidential elections since 2000 (Riccardi 2020). In the Senate, although a majority of the population votes for Democrats, Republicans can win a majority with less votes, due to how Senate seats are awarded with equal representation for each state, and that vote gap may increase in the future (McCarthy and Chang 2021). House of Representative districts are decided at the state level, but the trend is the same, where Democratic House representatives get more overall votes for each seat, but Republicans can still win a majority due to how districts are gerrymandered to their advantage (Rackich and Mejía 2020).

The Republicans have therefore benefited as a result of either a lower voter turnout and/or more voter restrictions. Moreover, Republican conservatism has become more undemocratic, relying upon gerrymandering, restricting voting and voting rights to gain or maintain political power (Epperly et al. 2020, 764-765; Patterson 2020, 149-151; Richardson 2020, 196-201). These parallel how southern (conservative) Democrats once relied upon undemocratic principles to suppress mostly African American voters in the South.⁸ The importance of the South to the contemporary Republican Party has mirrored what southern Democrats relied upon to maintain white party dominance of political power in the Jim Crow South (Epperly et al. 2020). As a

⁸ For more, see Alexander Keyssar (2009), *The Right to Vote*; Toby James (2012), *Elite Statecraft and Election Administration*, chapter 4.

result, the GOP has embraced southern white voters and how they identify at the expense of the rest of the country, as part of a “Long Southern Strategy” to gain political power (Maxwell and Shields 2019). The Republican Party became extremely reliant on the South as a base of support in the House of Representatives. By 2020, fifty-four percent of the House Republican seats were from the South. Such a reliance on the South has even surpassed the forty-seven percent the Democrats relied upon in 1954 (Hershey 2021, 151-152).

The southern strategy that benefited Trump’s 2016 victory, according to Heather Cox Richardson (2020), allowed the conservative controlled GOP to move beyond “the cloak of paternalism” and “display the core of their [conservative] ideology” (198-199). When the ideology was put into practice, such as slashing taxes and attempting to make government function at the behest of the elite over the demands of the people, it began to function as an oligarchy instead of a democracy (Richardson 2020, 199-200). Like such oligarchies as Russia, Trump relied on referring to the past in order to create a false narrative that painted him as both victim of and saviour to the problem(s). He even embraced chaos in order to use conflict as a way to deliver greatness, which Timothy Snyder labelled as “the politics of eternity” where he made a case that Trump followed in footsteps of Vladimir Putin (Snyder 2018, 8-9, 266-276). In this manner, Trump could have been able to claim that only he could “Make America Great Again” as well as “Keep America Great” if he had won a second presidential term, even with a minority of the vote that was based on the rural white, and a majority male, support that formed Trump’s base.

On the other hand, that approach did pay dividends for him in 2016, when he made headway and crushed the supposedly Democratic blue wall in the Midwest, especially the upper Midwestern states of Michigan and Wisconsin (Jack 2020). Also, in 2020, he gained minority

votes, including Hispanic voters in the heavily Democratic Rio Grande Valley area in Texas (Cardenas 2020). However, in the end, his method also cost him the popular vote by a wide margin in 2016 (CNN 2016) and even more so in 2020 (CNN 2020). Whilst Trump moved conservatism along on its current path, he was not able to challenge the current dominant regime that has guided presidential political leadership since Ronald Reagan's presidency, he merely gave it a sharper partisan edge (Skowronek 2020, 195-220).

In order for Trump or any future conservative Republican to challenge the current dominant regime, a shift from over-dependency on white voters is required. Population demographics reveal that as the white population decreased, minority population levels increased, and as of 2019, the white population right was at 60.1 percent, with the Hispanic population coming in second at 18.5 percent, making it harder to keep relying on the same election demographics used in previous years.⁹ However, based on his 2020 voting demographics Trump did provide a window of opportunity for the GOP to move beyond its reliance on older, white, and male voters. Whilst Trump suffered an overall decrease in white support, his minority support increased (Wolf, Merrill, and Wolfe 2020). What hurt Trump, especially, was the drop of white support in tight margin states that he lost to Biden, including Michigan, Arizona, Georgia and Pennsylvania (states in which Trump challenged the voting outcome) (Frey 2020). The opportunity for Hispanic GOP support is cultural (anti-abortion and negative views of the socialist label) and that is part of how Trump gained Hispanic votes in Texas and Florida (Alvarez 2020; Hernández and Martin 2020). As a result, the socio-cultural appeal of Trump as a strong man can appeal to Hispanic voters, but any passed voting (integrity) bills, which limit

⁹ For more, see Population Distribution by Race/Ethnicity, <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/distribution-by-raceethnicity/>

voting rights (access), may test that hypothesis, since it will be Hispanic voters that may be driven to vote Democratic in anger as a response in states with large Hispanic populations.

Party loyalty and policy

The loyalty displayed to Trump has resulted in a mixed bag for the GOP, but the rationale behind embracing it was an attempt to make use of the opportunity to move American government and its institutions in a conservative direction. The Republican Party, especially in Congress, has mostly been made up of steadfast Trump supporters of the Tea Party variety and others – especially the GOP leadership of Mitch McConnell (R-KY) in the Senate and first Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI) and now Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) in the House of Representatives – who have had a working relationship with Trump for the good of the party.¹⁰ Whilst the relationship was rocky at times, it did achieve one major victory that may last a generation – appointments of conservative justices to an increasingly conservative leaning Supreme Court (Espinoza 2018). The promise of a conservative dominated Supreme Court was a major reason why Trump secured the support of evangelicals, who placed a greater importance on what he could deliver politically over his personal baggage that seemed at odds with traditional moral values (Martí 2019). Evangelicals voted for Trump in 2016 at 81 percent, which was a higher rate of support than they showed George W. Bush in 2004 (78 percent), John McCain in 2008 (74 percent) and Mitt Romney in 2012 (78 percent) (Martínez and Smith 2016). Overall, Evangelicals were supportive of the results that Trump delivered (Lipka and Smith 2020).

The GOP risks making its loyalty to Trump the most important dimension of conservative Republicanism. A recent example was the removal of Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY) from her leadership position. Cheney was replaced by Elise Stefanik (R-NY) as the House Republican

¹⁰ For more on Trump and Congress, see Smith (2021), this issue.

Conference Chair on 12 May 2021. The reason for the switch was that Cheney challenged Trump's falsehoods and refused to support his "stolen election" mantra (Sotomayor and Alemany 2021). Stefanik was more resolute in showing of loyalty to Trump, but the irony of the switch is that Stefanik's voting record during the Trump presidency was *less loyal* than Cheney's voting record. A tracking of Trump's policy support positions had Cheney supporting Trump 92.9 percent¹¹ of the time, versus 77.7 percent¹² for Stefanik. Yet when it come party unity, Cheney had become a distraction and the House GOP (and congressional GOP in general) wanted to focus on beating Biden and congressional Democrats with the hope of winning back Congress in 2022 (Johnson 2021).

Nevertheless, their support for claims that the election was stolen, and their support for Trump's lies that fuelled the insurrection attempt shows loyalty to Trump above all else. The Republican congressional leadership also supported Trump by not agreeing to investigate the cause of the January 6th, 2021 attack on the Capitol. Their rationale is that winning control of Congress is a greater priority than investigating the causes behind the attack. They stated that focusing on the investigation could be better spent improving their party's chances during the 2022 midterm elections, but by ignoring the investigation the party is still supporting Trump as a de facto position (Lowell 2021). Moreover, supporting Trump and the election fraud myth has become a primary factor in Republicans challenging and running for posts as state election officials (secretary of state) in states that Trump lost (and disputed) in 2020, such as Arizona, Georgia, Michigan and Nevada; even challenging sitting Republicans who would not overturn the election results in favor of Trump as was the case in Georgia and Nevada (Montellaro 2021).

¹¹ For more, see Tracking Congress In The Age Of Trump (2021b), <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/congress-trump-score/liz-cheney/>

¹² For more, see Tracking Congress In The Age Of Trump (2021a), <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/congress-trump-score/elise-stefanik/>

It is becoming ever apparent that Trump's rhetoric and distortion of the truth has helped the GOP to evolve and is on the verge of becoming an un-democratic party that supports pushing America back towards a republic. For example, Republican voters who relied on the Trump campaign for election news were more concerned with election integrity and mailed in ballots than Republican voters who got their campaign news from other sources (Jurkowitz 2021). The Republican Party at the state level also embraced the election lie as well, creating voting restriction (election integrity) bills and laws that make it harder to vote, and the Senate filibuster has thus far prevented a Democratic controlled Congress from enacting a response (Gardner, Rabinowitz, and Stevens 2021). What has also helped the conservative response to voting restrictions, is that the public is beginning to take the GOP position on voter IDs (Sirota 2021).

Conclusion

Donald Trump has cast a lasting shadow on the Republican Party. His impact has been very influential on the party; and has triggered an overreliance on dishonesty as a means of debate (via paranoia and rage), which increased the socio-cultural appeal of embracing right-wing tendencies and has caused the party to become more openly hostile towards democracy as a way to gain/retain political power.

The party has a choice to make. Will the post-Trump era be a time to refocus and move the GOP and Republican conservatism back towards a more inclusive approach like George W. Bush tried with compassionate conservatism – one that could appeal to Hispanics to a larger degree? Or, will the GOP double down and attempt to forge onward with an increasingly hostile and white minority driven approach that can work for them given the current framework of America democracy? The former is the more difficult option, but may offer a long-term gain. The latter is the easier option in the short-term, but would dial up an already enraged country,

making it more of a republic than a democracy. Either choice would fit within the framework of the American Constitution, which originally established the country as a republic and only gradually became more democratic over time. The coming years, especially the midterm elections of 2022 and the presidential election year of 2024, will reveal whether the party cloaks itself in Trump's legacy or steps into the light.

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