

NATIONAL REVIEW

New Nationalists Make Three Big Bets

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In 1780, in a speech in Parliament, Edmund Burke described gambling as “a principle inherent in human nature.” Although casino operators and poker enthusiasts seem to love this quote, Burke wasn’t talking about five-card stud or roulette wheels. Nor was he speaking in praise of gambling. He was criticizing the abuse of political power, arguing that it “produced great mischief” when powerful people came to view government as a source of economic advancement, through political scheming or litigation, rather than relying on the careful stewardship of their own resources. He used the term “gaming” to describe this distasteful and socially destructive form of political corruption. “I would furnish no evil occupation for that spirit,” Burke said. “I would make every man look everywhere, except to the intrigue of a court, for the improvement of his circumstances.”

I think of Burke’s insight whenever I read some new scheme to solve a social problem with a new government program, subsidy, or regulation. There’s almost always some special interest behind it, some industry or organized lobby that will benefit at the public’s expense. As a conservative, I’ve seen and criticized plenty of this kind of mischief over the years, including some from the current Republican administration on trade policy, for example. But what really frustrates me isn’t the persistence of special pleading across shifts in partisan control — which is, as Burke pointed out, a predictable manifestation of unalterable human nature. It’s that a new cadre of conservative activists are invoking Edmund Burke’s name and legacy as they seek to defend Donald Trump, champion his policies, and construct a new political movement, a conservative version of nationalism, in the president’s political wake.

Burke is a foundational thinker in the conservative tradition. Books by or about him can be found on the bookshelves of the vast majority of conservatives with whom I’ve worked over the past three decades, alongside works by or about Plato, Aristotle, John Locke, Adam Smith, the American Founders, and a wide range of other foundational thinkers. It’s a canon that encompasses hopeful free-market economists and pessimistic conservative scribblers. It includes Christian apologists and secular theorists. It draws valuable insights from historical antagonists such as Burke and Thomas Paine, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, Henry Clay and Andrew Jackson, and Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone. It includes Burkean traditionalist Russell Kirk, who blasted libertarians, and Friedrich Hayek, who resented the intrusion of European-style blood-and-soil conservatism into America’s historically libertarian political culture and sought to bring champions of liberty and champions of tradition together in alliance against the rise of collectivism.

American conservatives draw wisdom from such varied sources because, to be blunt, Hayek and other coalition-builders had the better of the argument. “To talk of forming a league or coalition” between traditional conservatives and classical liberals, Kirk once wrote, “is like advocating a union of ice and fire. The ruinous failing of the ideologues who call themselves libertarians is their fanatic attachment to a simple solitary principle — that is, to the notion of personal freedom as the whole end of the civil social order, and indeed of human existence.” Kirk could turn a phrase. But on this point, he was all thunderclap and no light. Classical liberalism was about restraining the role of coercive government in human affairs, not reducing human affairs to a single explanation, purpose, or pursuit.

Throughout the 1800s and early 1900s, conservatives and classical liberals differed on many things and struggled for ascendancy in politics and ideas. The rise of nationalist populism and centralist progressivism, however, transformed the relationship from one of rivalry to one of at least grudging accommodation if not tacit cooperation against their common foes. By the middle of the 20th century, when the free world faced the twin perils of fascist and communist totalitarianism, the tacit had become the explicit. Amid the wreckage of post-war Europe and in response to the rising Soviet threat, conservatives and classical liberals formed new institutions and alliances. In the America of the 1950s, intellectual leaders such as William F. Buckley Jr., M. Stanton Evans, and Frank Meyer built a new and broader conservatism. Their ideas drew from both intellectual traditions, reflecting a complex and subtle interaction between the politics of freedom and the politics of virtue.

“The principles which inspire the contemporary American conservative movement are developing as the fusion of two different streams of thought,” Meyer famously wrote. “The one, which, for want of a better word, one may call the ‘traditionalist,’ puts its primary emphasis upon the authority of transcendent truth and the necessity of a political and social order in accord with the constitution of being. The other, which, again for want of a better word, one may call the ‘libertarian,’ takes as its first principle in political affairs the freedom of the individual person and emphasizes the restriction of the power of the state and the maintenance of the free-market economy as guarantee of that freedom.”

Although Meyer’s “fusionism” didn’t produce a true fusion of disparate elements into a single new philosophical compound, it did provide the intellectual container for a political movement that challenged progressives and populists alike who sought to expand the size, cost, and intrusiveness of American government. Was the modern conservative movement always or entirely successful? Of course not. But it arrested government encroachments in some areas and rolled them back in others.

Now, such fusionist thinking is derided as outmoded, incoherent, ineffective, and self-destructive. So-called liberalaltarians argue that the natural political and intellectual home of the classical liberal lies with the modern American liberal, the left-wing progressive with whom the libertarian supposedly shares the common values of equality and tolerance. And the new nationalists argue that the future of conservatism lies with populist economics, and with a passionate embrace of the nation-state as the organizing principle of political engagement and civil government.

It is a dramatic moment. Many Americans are frustrated — I get that. I am, too. And trying to fashion new political alliances and institutions must surely be tempting and exhilarating. But I believe both liberalaltarianism and conservative nationalism to be doomed enterprises.

For present purposes, I'll set aside the more fanciful claims of the new nationalists (such as the notion that libertarianism has ever been ascendant in the nation's capital), and I'll also say little else about the liberalitarian wager, for which there have been as yet few takers. The challenge that nationalist populism presents to modern American conservatism deserves closer attention, however. It has prominent champions in the White House, parts of Congress, and some conservative media. It also serves well the rhetorical interests of left-wing politicians and media who'd like nothing better than to stoke divisions within the American Right and to recast conservatism as a mashup of cultural and ethnic grievances rather than a governing philosophy for a federal republic of diverse peoples, preferences, and pursuits. That conservative nationalism scratches some itchy personal grievances for some individuals does not necessarily mean it lacks substance. There are arguments embedded within it. Its assumptions and predictions ought to be evaluated on their own terms. I'm just one conservative, admittedly, but my initial evaluation is decidedly unfavorable. I see conservative nationalism as a bundle of a least three big bets, all of them highly speculative, to put it mildly.

The Political Math of New Nationalism

The first big wager the new nationalists make is about political math. They are betting that a new-nationalist conservatism composed of populists and traditional-values voters will be broader, more enduring, and enjoy more electoral success than the post-war alliance of classical conservatives and classical liberals.

Of the latter group, the nationalists are dismissive. Classically liberal voters are so uncommon, they suggest, that if you got together a few mega-donors and the alumni of the Cato Institute's intern program, they'd form a quorum of the entire voting bloc. But these analyses are faulty. They treat doctrinaire, Milton Friedman—quoting libertarians, who are indeed relatively rare, as the prototype for the classically liberal voter. That's silly. Such a standard would never be applied to other electoral groupings. Outside of scholars, political activists, and public intellectuals, few voters have carefully considered, fully coherent ideologies derived from reading philosophical treatises or studying social-science research. Most progressive voters have never read John Dewey, Saul Alinsky, or Ta-Nehisi Coates. Few traditionalist or populist voters have read Justus Möser, Russell Kirk, or Patrick Deneen.

You don't have to wear an Adam Smith tie or collect Ayn Rand postage stamps to be a libertarian voter, broadly and practically defined. You simply have to mix a significant degree of fiscal conservatism with at least a moderate level of discomfort about aligning government policies too closely with a particular set of religious or moral beliefs. By that definition, the number of libertarian or classically liberal voters in the American electorate is a bit smaller than the number of traditionalist conservatives, but not massively so.

Different methodologies yield different answers, as Cato's Emily Ekins explained in a thoughtful 2017 review of polling data. Should analysts use only a few questions or an entire battery of questions? Should the "cultural" or "social" set of questions focus on abortion, same-sex marriage, race relations, or criminal-justice reform? What constitutes a significant degree of fiscal conservatism: support for tax cuts, resistance to welfare spending, or abolishing Social Security and Medicare? If you use something like the latter standard on fiscal policy, of course you will find few libertarian voters. But you will miss a considerable stretch of forest as you go looking for those few lone trees.

In reality, the bloc of voters who blend fiscal conservatism with a generally “hands off” policy on social issues is likely in the neighborhood of 15 percent to 20 percent. Labeling this group libertarian seems reasonable. A comparable bloc exhibits the opposite blend, social conservatism with support for significant government intervention in economic matters. These voters are often labeled populists or communitarians. The core Democratic-leaning group (progressives) and the core Republican-leaning group (traditionalist conservatives) are larger, somewhere between a quarter and a third of the electorate, depending on whether “softer” voters are classified as within these groups or as centrists tilting left or right. I’m hedging here because precision is impossible.

Again, most voters aren’t ideologues. They possess a collection of mental scripts, of moral “taste buds,” as social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues put it, that prime them to respond to political messages in varying ways depending on presentation and context. Because human beings are not identical in their sensitivities to moral tastes, it is possible to build separate useful voter typologies. But the polling data are open to multiple interpretations. The lines are blurry, and lots of voters straddle them. That having been said, when you see an analysis purporting to define one or more of these familiar voting blocs into the single digits, you should be skeptical of its methodology and value.

Here’s a simple (but I hope not too simplistic) example. In the 2016 General Social Survey, respondents were posed this question about economic policy: “On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government’s responsibility to reduce income differences between the rich and the poor?” They were also asked whether sexual relations between homosexuals were “always wrong, almost always wrong, sometimes wrong, or not wrong at all.” The share of respondents who said that homosexual acts were always or almost always wrong and that income equalization wasn’t the government’s responsibility — call them traditional conservatives — was right at 20 percent. Respondents with the opposite views on both issues, the progressives, totaled 28 percent. The libertarian quadrant (against equalization and not viewing homosexual sex as wrong) and the populist quadrant (mirror opposite of the libertarians) were also 20 percent each. The remaining 12 percent either left one of the two answers blank or provided the “sometimes wrong” answer on the homosexuality question. If the social-policy question were instead on abortion, the traditional-conservative quadrant would be larger (25 percent) and the libertarian smaller (17 percent). And if the respondents were screened for likelihood to vote, the relative proportions would also change. Again, think of significant clumps with fuzzy boundaries.

No single bloc of voters will ever constitute a majority. To win and govern, they must ally with others, finding enough common ground to work together while either resolving or tabling their differences. The Right faces no special challenge here. I teach a course on American conservatism to graduate students at Duke University. They invariably observe that the post-World War II coalition of traditionalists, libertarians, and Cold Warriors seemed unwieldy and unstable. “You’re right,” I respond, “but have you ever heard of the 1968 Democratic convention?” I go on to cite the many tensions plaguing today’s Democratic coalition. Oppositional politics keeps it together, at least some of the time, as has also been true for the GOP for much of its history.

The hope of the new nationalists is that by stiff-arming the libertarians, with their “market fundamentalism” and “libertinism,” conservative politicians can more than replace their numbers with populist voters by stressing immigration restriction, protectionism, and cultural

conservatism. Perhaps, but I tend to doubt it. Donald Trump won the Electoral College not with a broader electoral coalition but with a differently distributed one that took a few swing states by small margins. The GOP has, on the whole, lost electoral ground since then. Basing a long-term political strategy on repeats of 2016 feels like drawing to an inside straight. Yes, there are voters with conservative views on abortion, homosexuality, immigration, and the culture who frequently vote Democratic. But they've been voting that way because they favor large-scale income redistribution, government monopolies in education and health insurance, and a generous welfare state — and they tend to prioritize those issues over cultural ones. If the GOP doesn't deliver the economic policies they want, it won't win their allegiance. And if it does deliver those policies, what's the point of having a GOP?

To the extent that conservative politicians can attract populist voters by appealing to their skepticism about crony capitalism or the rule of experts, I'm all for it. Ditto for patriotic voters who resent the Left's relentless, revisionist assaults on America's history and accomplishments. But conservative politicians ought not to pursue new voters at the expense of retaining liberty-minded ones. Can a center-right political coalition exist in America without a few anarcho-capitalist economists and Locke-quoting foundation executives? Sure. But can it thrive and exercise political influence in America if it does not attract a large chunk of economically conservative, socially moderate voters? The odds on that seem rather long.

The Nationalist Threat to American Exceptionalism and Federalism

The second big bet of the new nationalists is that, when it comes to conserving and renewing American greatness, defeating the cultural agenda of progressivism is more important than shrinking the size and scope of government. Indeed, many say they hope not just to defeat the Left's program but to use government themselves, as a tool to rebuild families, communities, and domestic industries. More worrisome, their elevation of the nation-state as the antidote to the expansive schemes of progressives will test their commitment to traditional conservative principles of prudence, federalism, and constitutional restraint. Given the policy ideas they've offered so far, I don't feel good about the outcome of that test.

On economic mobility and advancement, for example, the new nationalists seem to have granted the Left's critique — market economies may be good for rich people but they give poor people and the middle class the shaft — and disagree with progressives merely about the specific policy tools the federal government ought to use to restrain capitalism and ameliorate the damage it does. It wasn't that long ago that conservatives routinely pointed out the manifest flaws in the Left's assertions about these matters. They pointed out that when properly adjusted for inflation, household size, and the government benefits already provided, American living standards are significantly higher than they were a generation or two ago. After-tax median incomes are up more than 25 percent just since 1999. Properly measured, the share of the population living below the poverty line has fallen from nearly a third in the early 1960s to the mid-single digits today.

Embracing the doom-and-gloom rhetoric of the Left isn't just bad statistics. It's bad politics. If conservatives refuse to defend the manifest and widespread benefits of economic freedom, who will? If they grant that modern capitalism requires the heavy hand of federal intervention to avoid disaster, will that arrest or advance the progressive cause?

Market economics isn't a rickety artifice. It isn't a historical oddity that has outlived its usefulness. It is one of the building blocks of our civilization, a manifestation of free choices by

free people and, as author Henry Grady Weaver once put it, the mainspring of human progress, at least in a material sense. When people exercise their freedom to buy and sell goods and services according to their own preferences, and pursue innovative new ways to meet human needs, can traditional economic arrangements and institutions be undermined? Yes. But using punitive taxes, import restrictions, or government planning to combat the forces of economic dynamism is nothing more than an attempt at income redistribution — one of the most expensive and corrupt versions of it, in fact. Even if conservatives must sometimes yield on the principle of government assistance, accepting either political reality or the argument for a limited government safety net to preserve public order, surely they ought not to embrace the most inefficient and unjust means of pursuing it. Protectionist tariffs are horrible public policy. American conservatives ought to say so, consistently and forcefully.

Of course, even if relatively unfettered markets continue to deliver the goods for the most part, many families face significant economic pressures and obstacles to upward mobility. To those challenges, conservatives have long advanced a range of solutions, such as fostering new investment in innovation and job creation, introducing more competition into the delivery of education and medical care, eliminating barriers to people entering new occupations or starting new enterprises, and reforming welfare and other programs that discourage family formation and self-sufficiency. More to the point, conservative governments have been implementing these policies for years at the state and local levels. Early results are promising, if varied, and conservative reformers are gaining knowledge and experience as they go.

None of these policies requires the American Right to abandon its traditional moorings, embrace industrial-policy schemes, or expand the welfare state. None of them shoulders aside the assumption that helping people who are down on their luck is primarily the responsibility of individuals acting through voluntary associations, particularly when the needy are their relatives, friends, or neighbors.

Even when it comes to proposals that divide conservatives, such as expanding child tax credits or allowing families to tap Social Security to fund parental leaves, debating the pros and cons requires no political or ideological realignments. Some conservatives are skeptical about child tax credits, for example, viewing them as little more than giveaways that, embedded in the tax code, trade off with other tax policies, such as rate reduction and accelerated depreciation, that can offer an immediate boost to investment and growth.

Other conservatives point out, however, that when reforms to federal or state taxes replace personal exemptions with a broader set of standard deductions, married couples with multiple children will pay more and others will pay less unless some adjustment is made for household size. This is not about using the tax code to favor some people's consumption over others. Children are not pets. In economic terms, rearing children is partly a form of human-capital investment that increases taxable income for the family as a whole in the long run. And because the federal budget largely consists of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid payments — in effect socializing the generational benefits of child-rearing — a tax code that fosters the formation of financial and physical capital while discouraging human capital is both unfair and unsustainable.

Or so says this libertarian-minded conservative. Perhaps you disagree. The point is that I didn't need to abandon "free-market ideology" or embrace populism to reach my conclusion. And if I had yoked the idea of child tax credits to some kind of nativist agenda or bare-knuckles electoral

strategy, that would be problematic. Conservatives shouldn't try to outbid progressives with government handouts to buy votes. We'll lose. And we shouldn't turn a practical conversation about the proper tax treatment of investment into a culture war. We'll lose.

This may be indelicate to say, but when prominent new nationalists cite populist and nationalist movements in other countries as potential models or inspirations for a refashioned conservative movement in America, I get suspicious. No, I don't see a proto-fascist behind every bush. What I do see is a rather clumsy attempt to extract some generic version of "nation-statism" from a wide range of national contexts and then to use it as an organizing principle for American politics and policymaking.

I believe strongly in American exceptionalism, as have generations of conservatives. The proposition isn't that the American conception of nationhood is necessarily superior. But it is distinctive. New nationalists often ridicule the idea that we are a creedal nation, that the ideas and institutional arrangements enshrined in our founding documents, and applied (however imperfectly) throughout our history, have shaped the core narrative of our political identity as a nation. I have a hard time imagining a stronger bonding agent, however. What else can bind together more successfully the descendants of aboriginal nations, fearless explorers, faithful pilgrims, ambitious tradesmen, hardy pioneers, African slaves, hopeful immigrants, and desperate refugees from virtually every corner of the world? It obviously can't be a shared ethnicity, religious denomination, economic condition, or lived experience.

American-ness is creedal, it seems to me, or nothing much at all. Conservatives are properly concerned that the traditional American creed of liberty and equality under the law has come under constant attack for decades, from revisionists and provocateurs who seem either unconcerned about or even to relish the divisiveness their attacks create. Should American conservatism, under the sway of the new nationalists, now open up its own line of attack by denigrating or dismissing classical liberalism? It would take a great feat of revisionist acrobatics to deny the influence of classical-liberal ideas on our country's founding and development (although the ideas didn't necessarily bear that label at the time). And to base a 21st-century program of electoral politics and governmental reform on a large-scale rejection of the Enlightenment project as a whole strikes me as tone-deaf and preposterous.

The job of conservatives is to conserve — and in America, that means to conserve the distinctive interaction and blending of freedom and virtue that formed and continues to inform our best practice of politics. It means conserving classical liberalism alongside classical conservative insights about human nature and human flourishing. It means Burke having a productive conversation with Hayek, metaphorically speaking (though I suspect that in real life they'd have engaged in spirited argument on some points but gotten along pretty well, and viewed themselves not as adversaries but as allies against Continental radicalism).

One of America's founding principles is that our national government should do little while its states and localities do more. I know we've strayed far from our federalist roots. Does that mean conservatives should give up the struggle? Many of the new nationalists' policy prescriptions strike me as imprudently investing still more confidence and power in the national government. Perhaps their intentions will be good. The likely outcomes, however, will be disappointing results and a new set of national policy tools that future progressives will employ to our great detriment.

Simply put, when it comes to public policy, the nation-state should certainly *not* be the organizing principle for conservative governance for a sprawling country encompassing hundreds of millions of people. For any given public problem, conservatives should assume that it is probably overstated, more complicated than it first appears, and best addressed by governors, legislators, mayors, and other state and local officials, if at all by government action. If it takes years or decades to try out different solutions across our diverse collection of red, blue, and purple political jurisdictions, so be it. If you are too impatient or impetuous to place your trust in gradual, case-by-case experimentation, I'd be tempted to question your commitment to America's founding principles and constitutional institutions. But I'd do so politely.

The Trump Gambit

Finally, whether the new nationalists admit it or not, they are making a huge and consequential bet on the presidency of Donald Trump. It is certainly the case that populist attacks on the structure and priorities of modern American conservatism are nothing new. Pat Buchanan launched them repeatedly during the 1990s. Southern and prairie populists did the same thing generations earlier. They lambasted free trade. They expressed grave doubts about the effects of capitalism and immigration on economic stability and cultural cohesiveness. Some made an explicit appeal to racial and ethnic prejudice. Others implied it, or used euphemisms for it.

But the rise of Trump represents something new. Contrary to the calumnies offered by both progressives and populists, Trump isn't just a blunter version of previous Republican presidents and conservative leaders. He isn't Ronald Reagan with a shorter IMDb page. He isn't an Internet-age Barry Goldwater. To the extent Trump has had consistent political convictions over the decades, they have little to do with American constitutionalism, individual liberty, resistance to totalitarianism, or defense of traditional values. Trump has long advocated a strident protectionism — Japan was the main villain of his narratives during the 1980s, as China is today — and expressed contempt for politicians with significant political experience. Both exemplify garden-variety American populism. Both are also rhetorical devices designed to cloak the schemes of special interests in the apparel of popular sovereignty.

When conservative leaders and voters embraced the Trump candidacy in 2016, many did so as a political transaction. If he agreed to nominate constitutional conservatives to the federal bench, pledged to advance traditionally conservative approaches to tax and regulatory policy, and focused relentlessly on beating Hillary Clinton, they'd sign up. He did. They did. This arrangement did not in theory require reshaping American conservatism in any fundamental or lasting way. In practice, however, some who supported Trump grudgingly in 2016 have found themselves thrust by our polarized politics into a role of Trump-explainer, if not Trump-whisperer. Others, for various reasons, have freely and enthusiastically become reflexive defenders of the president. Among the latter are leading voices of the new nationalists. They are playing with fire. They may well get burned. I'd rather not see the wider conservative movement scorched with them.

To be fair, the new nationalists have done their best, explicitly and repeatedly, to distance their emerging movement from white nationalists, alt-right fakirs, strident isolationists, and other assorted cranks. That's much appreciated. Alas, their precautions will likely prove inadequate, in part because their cause has so many prominent champions, including but not limited to the president, who are prone to rhetorical excess and theatrical provocation. Trump can't help himself, truly. He's going to wake up tomorrow, or the next day, with some stray thought that a

prudent leader would set aside. Trump will tweet it. When tragedy strikes, as we saw in the aftermath of mass shootings in California, Texas, and Ohio, the president will recite some well-written remarks and likely mean them. Before too long, though, he'll be back on Twitter. He's not winning new converts to the conservative cause there.

I don't know if Donald Trump will be reelected in 2020. Neither, respectfully, do you. We should have learned from 2016 not to predict election outcomes with great confidence. I do feel comfortable predicting, however, that Trumpism as a political phenomenon will not long outlast him. He is wearing on America's nerves. He is wearing us out. To the extent that the new nationalism looks and feels like an attempt to flesh out the political and economic dimensions of Trumpism into a durable political coalition and governing philosophy, its fate is bound up with his own. I would not bet on a favorable long-run outcome. I hope American conservatives don't, either.