

Idea Man Rubio Envisions a 'Common Good' GOP

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In this economy, even a sitting United States senator can use a second job. So Marco Rubio teaches every Friday at Florida International University.

An upper-level seminar for undergraduates, the course is online, which makes it easy enough for him to hop from Congress to the classroom. Rubio lectures on politics, appropriately enough, and many of the students give their politician-professor high marks. But unlike the more than 13 million Americans who have multiple jobs to make ends meet, Rubio doesn't do it for the money.

He likes teaching because he likes learning, and he likes learning, he says, "because I'm not dead."

"If you're alive, that means every single day you're seeing new things and learning new things," Rubio told RealClearPolitics during a recent interview. "The only point at which people should stop growing and evolving is the day you're no longer alive."

The not-dead, very-much-alive senator once heralded for his youth and dynamism will turn 50 this year, and says he has learned a lot, particularly in the last half decade. "You can't travel the entire country, meet as many people as I did, see as many communities as I did, and not be influenced by it," he says, referencing his bid for the Republican presidential nomination in 2015/16. "Nor can you look at what happened with Trump's nomination and election without wondering, 'Okay, well, what's behind this?'"

And in this economy, where the majority of Americans believe the next generation will be worse off than their parents, and at this moment, when Republicans are struggling with their post-Trump identity, Rubio has an answer. It is called "common good" conservatism, an agenda to make the GOP "the party of common-sense wisdom and working-class values." If he runs for president again, the country will decide what to make of the renewed Rubio, the populist ideas man on the right.

A handful of his students have already weighed in. Most love him and his lectures. "Super interesting," reads an anonymous review on the website RateMyProfessor, where Rubio has earned an impressive 4.4 out of 5 stars. Some were less enthusiastic. "So boring," one moaned. "Couldn't stay awake."

Rubio's idea certainly has an academic quality, but it is also deeply personal in that it challenges the free-market fundamentalism long embedded in the DNA of modern conservatism.

Controversy followed when the two-term senator called for a more equitable kind of capitalism in a speech at Catholic University in November 2019. A National Review writer likened the response to that seen at the Republican National Convention in 1988, the one where George

H.W. Bush called for a “kinder and gentler nation.” An icy Nancy Reagan reportedly whispered, “Kinder and gentler than whom?”

Rubio knows the feeling. He confronts an entrenched status quo skeptical of government action. The free market is just fine, thank you very much, say his libertarian and conservative critics (when they’re being polite). He believes the opposite. He thinks the “American carnage” that Donald Trump described is real: Corporations are unbolting and shipping factories overseas at an alarming rate; global competitors such as China are all too happy to gorge on the remains; and the federal government does little to bind up the wounds of the workforce left behind, let alone prepare them with the skills needed to get ahead.

In this economy, Rubio says there is no way that his mother the maid and his father the bartender, the parents he referenced again and again on the campaign trail, could succeed. He is not a complete apostate, however: “Generally speaking,” he explains, “the free market should decide where investment flows and where decisions are made.” But he is questioning GOP orthodoxy. “Every now and then, the market is going to reach an outcome that’s bad for Americans or bad for America,” he says. “At that point, as a policymaker my loyalty is not to the market; my loyalty is to the American people.”

Challenging the absolute good of a self-interested market has been enough to turn the invisible hand into a clenched fist. To conservative columnist George Will, Rubio is a heretical “anti-capitalist conservative” who doesn’t realize that his agenda requires “an imprudent leap of faith.” To Nikki Haley, Rubio is worse. In what was seen as a veiled shot, the former Southern Carolina governor and U.N. ambassador -- and presumed 2024 presidential hopeful -- dismissed his proposed common-good capitalism as “hyphenated capitalism.” That, she said, “is no capitalism at all. The better name for it is socialism lite.”

The son of Cuban exiles bristles when asked about the Haley-hyphenation. He welcomes debate but not that barb. He called it a “lazy argument,” adding, “I’m not somebody that needs to be lectured on socialism.

“I live in a community, surrounded by people constantly who had their lives destroyed by it,” he continued, referencing the Cuban Americans in Florida who fled communism and make up his most loyal constituency. “This is not socialism,” he said of his policy vision, “or anything remotely close to it.”

What makes him different from others on the right is that, while he reveres the blessings that flow from free markets, he isn’t willing to totally entrust the fate of the nation or its workers to an economic creed that in its most unadulterated form consists of offering alms to Wall Street and hoping for the best.

“I believe in private ownership driven by incentives to make investment decisions in the marketplace,” he insists. “The fallacy, though, is that we don’t create incentives. We already do.” Create the wrong incentives through taxation or regulation, he argues, and the market will provide the wrong outcomes. This often leads to a mismatch in the corporate versus national interest.

“So my argument is that we have to have a capitalist economy,” Rubio explains, “but it has to be a capitalist economy guided by the principle that the market exists to serve the people, not the people to serve the market.” What, then, is the difference between Rubio’s common-good

capitalism and, say, the “accountable capitalism” of Sen. Elizabeth Warren? It’s a question that more conservative critics have asked.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren advocates for “accountable capitalism,” a concept from which Rubio is quick to distinguish his idea for “common good capitalism.”

“The difference is that the approach Bernie [Sanders] and Warren and others take is more punitive,” he responds. “It’s more, you know, ‘We think these companies make too much money’ or ‘We’re going to use government to force outcomes.’” By contrast, his approach is that “we need to use the power of incentives to drive the market to reach outcomes that are good for America.”

That openness to government action is a big deal, says Oren Cass. A member of Rubio’s brain trust, he tells RCP that Republican thinkers reflexively think that tax cuts and free trade, increased immigration and a restricted government are good. They can be, Cass says, “but over the past 40 years they have hardened into a dogma totally disconnected from the actual challenges that America faces.”

The Rubio project, as Cass sees it, is “an argument for a return to *actual* conservatism,” one where markets “are a means to the end of a strong, stable, prosperous society,” not an end in and of themselves. Rubio recognizes those distinctions, he says. Moreover, common-good conservatism requires policymakers to reach consensus on a shared goal for American society and to pursue those ends through politics, Cass says, “as opposed to the libertarian view that the outcome of free and atomized individuals making unconstrained choices is, per se, the right outcome.”

Finding that common good then, has been the work of Rubio in the Trump era, or as Republican pollster Whit Ayres, who once likened the senator to the “Michael Jordan of politics,” puts it, Rubio has spent the last four years “working on his jump shot.”

The fundamentals of that shot, the application of his common-good conservatism to actionable policy, has centered around improving life for working-class families and, in turn, bolstering an American economy threatened by a rising China. On these twin fronts, Rubio has been prodigious. He led the successful effort to double the child tax credit from \$1,000 to \$2,000 in order to ease the cost of raising a child, threatening to vote against Republican tax credits if the party didn’t get on board. He even suggested shrinking the amount of a proposed corporate tax cut to pay for it.

Meanwhile, he balked at the supply-side theory at the heart of those corporate cuts. Instead of helping businesses expand, lower corporate taxes often lead to stock buy-backs, Rubio argued. So the Florida lawmaker introduced a proposal that allows companies to use tax cuts for capital investment (i.e. building a new factory or buying new equipment) but removes tax advantages for buying back its own stock shares.

He has voiced support for private-sector unions, a rarity on the right. He urged his colleagues to consider rethinking their opposition to organized labor, perhaps backing co-ops like those in Europe, as the decline in unionization has coincided with anemic growth in living standards.

Rubio has also called for an industrial policy to create partnerships between the state and private businesses wherever national security is involved, another policy anathema to libertarian

conservatives. Rather than let a global market determine which company to support -- lest that corporation go overseas in search of lower labor costs and higher profit margins -- the senator would have the federal government prop up domestic manufacturing in critical sectors. Think steel, semiconductors components and, of particular concern during the pandemic, pharmaceuticals.

“When you have a nation-state stepping in and subsidizing an industry to undercut their competitors, their goal is to put you out of business so they dominate the industry,” Rubio says in explaining the need for government industrial policy.

The rare-earth minerals industry is dominated by China, to the great concern of Rubio and others.

“We are playing by one set of rules while they are playing by another set. Now, maybe that doesn't matter if you're making T-shirts,” he added. “But it does matter when you talk about rare-earth minerals, or any of these other critical capacities that are going to define the 21st century economy.”

In a [December 2019 speech](#) at the National Defense University, he said the fact that China controls 80% of rare-earth mineral production was “the best example” of a scenario where “an industry is critical to our national interest, yet the market determines it is more efficient for China to dominate it.” But is that a market failure or a government failure?

A rare-earth deposit discovered in Round Top, Texas, promises a century's worth of supply. Meanwhile, industry leaders complain that it is the government's environmental regulations that make it [too expensive to bring this precious resource to market](#). Wouldn't the conservative answer, then, be to loosen federal regulations rather than get the state involved?

“Yes, we make it more expensive than it needs to be potentially -- we certainly don't want to do anything that's harmful to the environment or public safety,” Rubio says of his “best example” of a market failure. But he insists again that an industrial policy is needed because the U.S. is “making a mistake when we think we can approach it as a free-market product but [the Chinese] are going to approach it as a strategic nation-state investment.”

He has plenty of other ideas. Some of them are wonky, and most require a more muscular federal government. New thinking is required, Rubio insists, because the Republican Party is undergoing a realignment. “We had a voting block that relied on working-class Americans,” he says, “and then sort of our governing and finance class that had a very different view of the world.” Cobbled together, that coalition worked for a while and “we won some elections.” Beneath the surface, though, Rubio admits “there was a tension that eventually was unsustainable.”

Republicans can ignore the rumblings. They can just bask in the unity that comes from being the opposition party. But this would be a mistake, says Newt Gingrich. “The formula I've been advocating is to say ‘no’ 20% of the time,” the former House speaker told RCP, “then 80% of the time you have to be positive and offer better ideas.”

And something new is needed, given that Republicans have lost the popular vote in seven of the last eight presidential elections. “That should be a pretty good signal that we need to find some other message to appeal to more than a minority of the country,” Ayres says. “In a government

of the people, by the people, for the people,” he quipped, “it helps to have the majority of people behind where you’re trying to go.”

What is stopping Republicans from becoming the party of ideas? They talk about them plenty, and every other year it seems that a new face finds a new way to rewarm old talking points. The reoccurring problem, according to Gingrich, is “the pure nihilist wing of the party.”

“There are two factions of the party,” as he sees it. “One is a hide-bound ‘right-wingism’ which has decided that any change since the late 18th century is probably bad. The other is defined by a commitment to get up every morning yelling ‘no’ against whatever Democrats are doing.” Neither leads to much, Gingrich argues. “What the country wants is a problem-solving, solution-oriented conservatism that recognizes you can use civil society, free enterprise, and classic traditional values to create a far better future.”

Rubio has that vision, Gingrich believes, one that flows naturally through Ronald Reagan and fulfills his own 1994 “Contract With America.” The task now is to sharpen it during the Biden administration. While chairing the Senate Intelligence Committee and Small Business Committee at the end of the last Congress, Rubio got a head start on his GOP competition before Biden even took office. He churned out speeches and op-eds and two lengthy reports on domestic investment and Chinese competition. Maybe the average voter doesn’t do the Rubio reading, but tens of millions of Americans have benefited from the Paycheck Protection Program.

The program Rubio helped create was perhaps the perfect confluence of the senator’s thinking. Left to its own devices during the pandemic, the market likely would have determined that massive layoffs were necessary. What was best for business in the short term, though, likely wasn’t best for the nation. Enter public policy and billions of taxpayer dollars.

The party of Ronald Reagan spent big, and Rubio helped mail the checks. At the end of his tenure as chairman, the program had helped support as many as 55 million jobs during the pandemic, a number that included up to 4.5 million in manufacturing jobs. According to Republicans, it was a smashing success. According to Rubio, he would have never supported it *in normal times*.

“When you have a pandemic, and people are going to be out of work, you have one of two choices,” he said of the expressly big government action. “A) You can help those people by pouring money into the unemployment system; or b) you can keep them attached to work.” Inaction in the crisis wasn’t an option, he says, likening the mandated lockdowns to a government “taking.”

“If you lose these companies, not only do you lose entire swaths of industry, but if the contagion becomes extraordinary, they can now say we’re behind on commercial rents, and then it just starts to cascade from there,” he explained. But Rubio is careful to qualify the success. He wouldn’t typically support that kind of action because ordinarily there wouldn’t be a national emergency requiring that level of intervention.

Arguments about the role of government, debates about the size of the state, are inherently American. And conservatives especially enjoy that kind debate. But do voters?

This isn't the first time Republicans in the minority have come to the conclusion that ideological purity tests are political non-starters. "Our average voter is not John Galt," Sen. Mitch McConnell said back in 2014, referencing the individualist hero of Ayn Rand's "Atlas Shrugged." That same year, Sen. Mike Lee, a close ally of Rubio and a Tea Party stalwart, declared that "hymns to entrepreneurialism are, as a practical matter, largely irrelevant." They had no idea – a year before a real estate mogul descended on the Trump Tower escalator into American political history -- just how right, and how wrong, they were.

Trump bull-rushed the primary field to win the Republican nomination and later the presidency, not by making ideological overtures but by insisting that the country was falling behind and the D.C. elite wasn't doing enough to stop the decline. An analysis of the Trump coalition by Emily Ekins of the Cato Institute found it wasn't the traditional conservative voter alone who delivered the Oval Office.

"There is no 'one kind of Trump voter,'" Ekins wrote after surveying more than 8,000 of them. True, more than half fit into the familiar conservative and libertarian divide, 31% and 25%, respectively. But the rest were an eclectic coalition not normally at home in the GOP. There were the so-called American preservationists who were more economically progressive and suspicious of the social-political status quo (20%). Another 19% were "anti-elite," similarly suspicious of the establishment and generally progressive, and 5% were just "disengaged."

Looking at those numbers, Ayers surmises, "it's pretty clear that traditional Republican orthodoxy can be adjusted to political effect." This doesn't necessarily mean abandoning all economic principles, though. Gingrich argues that it requires, instead, that the GOP "reject a purely negative conservatism that has no new ideas, no positive answers, and doesn't deal with the problems of the average American," the kind of conservatives "who want to stand somewhere and yell 'no.'" Both Ayers and Gingrich like Rubio's alternative.

His common-good philosophy has plenty of potential answers, and Rubio hopes that by enacting such an agenda, Republicans can become "the party of common-sense wisdom and working-class values." But all of this invites an inevitable question: How involved should the former president be?

"He is going to play whatever role he wants," Rubio told RCP the day before a golden idol of Trump was rolled onto the ballroom floor of CPAC and two days before he addressed thousands of adoring fans gathered in Orlando for that conference. On the question of how the party should move forward, Rubio is a realist: "He is going to be part of that conversation." It was Trump, he said, who ripped off the blinders of the party and expressed what voters were feeling.

"You don't have to like the way Donald Trump expressed himself to recognize that he hit on something that's legitimate and valid. And for millions of Americans, the loyalty and the support they've shown him is because he gave voice to what they have been feeling and thinking for a long time," Rubio said.

"What a lot of people miss," Rubio explained, is that when Trump was attacked for talking about tariffs or bringing back jobs, voters "didn't view it as an attack on Trump; they viewed it as an attack on them — 'This is what they've been doing to us for all this time.'"

Of that sentiment, Rubio concluded, "I don't know how you can ignore it, unless the Republican Party doesn't want to win any more elections."

With or without Trump, those voter anxieties aren't going anywhere. And they'll only compound as younger, less ideologically inclined voters come of age. "I'm still a member of that generation that bridges the two, that remembers a time when a bartender and a maid could own a home," Rubio says of that Republican problem. "But my kids are growing up at a time in which two college graduates aren't guaranteed to be able to make enough to own a home, much less start a family and retire with dignity."

He warns that after weathering seismic moments like the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic, millennials and members of Gen Z are looking for a sense of security. They are more likely to embrace the promise of Andrew Yang's guaranteed monthly income than a libertarian's lecture about the power of free markets.

"I don't think they're lazy. I don't think they're looking for a handout in the traditional sense," Rubio says of Yang's young followers. "I just think the human instinct is to want security, and if they believe the market and the economy aren't providing it, but the government can, that is appealing."

Countering the subversive appeal of a benevolent government is perhaps an extreme encapsulation of the problem Rubio is trying to solve. "We need to have an alternative that shows how, in fact, we can have a market that provides [security] again," Rubio said. The professor-politician, the populist ideas man, has been working on answers. He has a good idea of what he wants to do. Does he have a good idea of how to accomplish it? More specifically, Rubio is asked if he still wants to run for president.

"For me to tell you [that] I have no interest at all is silly," he admits. "I ran for president once, so clearly at some point I had interest and could have in the future," he says.

"I think what has probably changed me over the last few years is I recognize that I have no idea what the world or my life would look like in four years," he continues before pausing to qualify even more: "I don't know what my life is going to look like in one year."

Rubio says he will focus on two things in the immediate future. His job in the opposition and getting reelected to the Senate in 2022. He has plans, and he is good at teaching them to others. His future, and the future of his party, could very well depend on whether fellow Republicans listen.