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Donald Trump's Win Starts a New Era for Republicans

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Overnight, President-elect Donald Trump has reshaped what it means to be a Republican, leaving some longtime party officials scrambling to find their places in a new political era.

Having dispatched the Bush and Clinton political dynasties during his run for the White House, Mr. Trump's policies are set to become the party's policies.

The hawkish stance against Russia articulated by running mate Mike Pence, the entitlement cuts proposed by House Speaker Paul Ryan and the support for free trade that have defined conservatives for a generation—all are on the wane.

While Donald Trump was attracting large crowds to campaign rallies, a small group of allies was gathering at a Washington office to plot the president-elect's first months in office.

Democratic leaders, officeholders and donors said Wednesday the party needs to recruit younger candidates and address the anxieties of working-class voters who flocked to Donald Trump's candidacy—or face recurring losses.

Throughout Mr. Trump's populist campaign, Washington Republicans sought separation from some of Mr. Trump's proposals on trade and foreign policy that broke from party orthodoxy. Establishment Republicans demurred when he promised to build a border wall and send the bill to Mexico.

Now, though, Republicans in Washington and across the country are beginning to start adopting the Trump agenda as their own. On Wednesday, Mr. Ryan said he would work with Mr. Trump to “make America great,” echoing his campaign slogan.

Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio, who cruised to re-election on Tuesday, said on Wednesday that Senate Republicans would be able to meld Mr. Trump's priorities with the agenda they ran on.

“I think there's a way to combine what he's been talking about on the campaign trail with a broader reform effort that has a chance now,” Mr. Portman said.

Eight hours after Mr. Trump claimed victory, Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton delivered a formal concession speech on Wednesday morning in New York. She called her loss “painful” but urged the country to accept Mr. Trump as the next president. “Donald Trump is going to be our president,” she said.

President Barack Obama invited his successor to the White House, where Mr. Trump is expected on Thursday. In remarks in the Rose Garden, Mr. Obama promised a “smooth transition” to a Trump administration.

Outside of Washington, Republicans found themselves trying to define what it now means to be a Republican. Elected officials are adapting to the new reality by preparing to adopt positions held by Mr. Trump with which they previously disagreed.

The day after Republican Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election, political leaders spoke about the results and the need to unite under new leadership. Photo: Getty

Republican Frank LaRose, a moderate Ohio state senator who is planning a 2018 run for Ohio secretary of state, never endorsed Mr. Trump, but did vote for him on Tuesday. He said Republicans have to take a second look at Trump positions they dismissed during the presidential campaign.

“We have to take the lesson that was given to us by the American people last night to heart, and what that means is they want change,” Mr. LaRose said. “Does the result of last night change me politically? No, but it gives me things to reflect on.”

In Boone County, Iowa, Republicans used Mr. Trump’s coattails to sweep Democrats out of a pair of county supervisor seats. Even at the local level, Mr. Trump’s strength will convert otherwise wary Republicans to his policy agenda, said Gary Nystrom, the Boone County GOP co-chairman.

“Donald Trump opened the eyes of some of the Republicans, and I think you’ll see some shift on issues,” Mr. Nystrom said. “You better keep your eyes and ears open to adhere to what the public wants.”

But in South Carolina, former state GOP Chairman Katon Dawson said Mr. Trump’s victory also comes with big risks for the president-elect and the GOP: He has promised big change, and the electorate is an impatient one.

“The party is going to have to chart a new way forward. Trump’s got a new definition, but we don’t know what it means to be a Republican,” Mr. Dawson said. “In politics, you’ve got to govern the way you campaign.”

Even officials on Mr. Trump’s transition effort say it will be a challenge to fuse the president-elect’s agenda with one adhered to by more conventional Republicans who will seek to implement it.

“How do you bridge or integrate traditional constitutional conservatism with the stream of economic national populism he has tapped into?” said Ken Blackwell, who is in charge of domestic issues for the Trump transition team. “This is going to be the most fundamental realignment of the base that has taken place since 1980.”

Among those trying to rise in the new Republican Party are people such as Richard Spencer, the president of the National Policy Institute, an organization that advocates race-based identity politics and was among Mr. Trump’s most enthusiastic supporters.

With the election of Donald Trump, NATO now faces one of the biggest challenges since the Cold War. WSJ’s Niki Blasina discusses three ways the president-elect could impact the organization.

Mr. Spencer has run his organization from his homes in Virginia and Montana. Now, he is aiming to expand the “alt-right” movement he is credited with organizing by establishing a Washington headquarters to “create a movement in the real world” from his online following akin to established conservative think tanks.

“A lot of conservatives want to go back to their principles,” Mr. Spencer said. “They want to go back to the old religious hot button issues, but I don’t think we can go back. That kind of thing didn’t win and Trumpian populism did.”

At the libertarian Cato Institute, executive vice president David Boaz said Mr. Trump’s victory shows that many Republicans are no longer committed to the Reagan philosophy of strong defense and small government that has guided the party for two generations.

“I don’t know where conservatives can go,” Mr. Boaz said. “Right now, you have to say there is no major political party that is even rhetorically committed to small government and free enterprise.”

To be sure, there were members of established conservative organizations thrilled with Mr. Trump’s victory. Penny Nance, the chief executive of the antiabortion group Concerned Women for America, said she sang the “Hallelujah Chorus” in her office on Wednesday morning.

Even though Mr. Trump entered the campaign without a connection to social conservatives or fluency on their issues, Mrs. Nance said she thought the new administration would be the friendliest to the antiabortion cause in her lifetime.

“Donald Trump has made some big promises to us and other people, and I’m confident at this moment that he’ll work to follow through on what he said he will do,” she said.

Trump won votes with his populist message, which especially resonated with rural, white Americans

Republican president-elect Donald Trump gives a thumbs up to the crowd during his acceptance speech at his election-night event at the New York Hilton Midtown Manhattan in the early morning hours of Wednesday. Trump defeated Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton to become the 45th president of the U.S.

There remains in some quarters of the GOP an element of denial that Mr. Trump has taken over the party. Weekly Standard editor Bill Kristol, who publicly opposed the president-elect for months and sought to recruit an independent candidate for president, said Wednesday that he hopes Mr. Trump will govern as a traditional conservative.

“I think he’ll be a more successful president if it is less the party of Trump and more a conservative party that checks him and tries to steer him and persuade him in many policy areas,” Mr. Kristol said.

In Wisconsin, conservative talk-show host Charlie Sykes spent the past year lambasting Mr. Trump on his morning radio show, building a national profile for himself through his opposition to the GOP nominee. His show on Wednesday, he said, featured him “eating crow” for three and a half hours. Mr. Sykes, who also edits a conservative magazine and website, said he is resigned to the Trump takeover of the GOP.

“Donald Trump,” Mr. Sykes said, “is going to be the face of the Republican Party and of conservatism for the next four years whether we like that or not.”