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## Meet the New Boss. Actually Quite Different From the Old Boss.

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In the end, the wheelers and dealers faded away, trying to get what they could under cover of darkness. Their loss of stature was abrupt. Only those willing to soldier on as subordinates remained, ceding authority to their leader, President Trump.

For four decades, from 1968 to 2008, what was loosely described as the Republican establishment — the party's congressional leaders, campaign operatives, donors, lobbyists and special interests — reigned supreme.

Every four years, the party's presidential nominee secured the establishment's stamp of approval. Endorsements from governors and senators — and a gigantic campaign chest fed by major Republican fund-raisers — were the main markers of that approval.

In a party deeply committed to hierarchy, the establishment-favored candidate was always the next in line, often the vice president (George H.W. Bush in 1988) or the candidate who had come in second (or a very close third) in the previous contested nomination battle (Ronald Reagan 1980, Bob Dole 1996, John McCain 2008 and Mitt Romney 2012).

Now, the Republican establishment, embodied in the Bush family, proud but powerless, is a relic of a past, brought to its knees by insurgent forces, not least of which is the ascendance of social media.

“The Republican Party today is very much an outsiders' party,” Ari Fleischer, White House press secretary for the last anointed president, George W. Bush, said in an interview. “The mood of the party is ‘pound the table’ and say ‘everybody who has been on the inside is part of the problem’.”

John Feehery, a lobbyist who served as a top aide to the Republican House leadership, argued in an email that the collapse of the establishment began during the administration of George W. Bush:

The establishment destroyed itself by blundering into the Iraq war and by not preventing the financial crisis of 2007. Those were the precipitating events that gave rise to the Tea Party which ultimately transformed into the Trump movement.

“At a more granular level,” Feehery continued,

the so-called influencers distanced themselves from the actual voters, retreating into a bubble and pontificating from their gated communities. This gave rise to the popularity of the conservative media movement, which became the go-to news source. The news from these sources didn’t have to be fully accurate as long as it seemed right.

It cannot be emphasized enough how central the rise of information age right-wing media has been to the shifting balance of power within the Republican Party. In “Placing Media in Conservative Culture,” Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins, political scientists at Michigan State and Boston College, write that the growing strength of the ideological media “represents a mixed blessing from the perspective of Republican politicians and traditional conservative elites.”

On the plus side, they write,

Fox News, talk radio, and right-wing internet sites allow Republicans to communicate with their party’s popular base and help to mobilize conservative activists and voters against the Democratic opposition.

On the negative side,

the distinctive popular conservative culture that these media outlets both reinforce and promote is also fertile ground for repeated challenges to the party’s existing leadership by self-styled political outsiders — including, most notably, Donald Trump.

The direct threat posed by conservative broadcast and digital media to the Republican establishment, according to Grossmann and Hopkins, is that figures like Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity gain leverage not only by attacking the left, but “by accusing Republican politicians of ineffectiveness in opposing — if not outright complicity in — the enduring nemesis of liberalism.”

Fox, Breitbart, Townhall, The Daily Caller and other right-wing media outlets now perform multiple functions traditionally associated with political parties: candidate screening, the maintenance of ideological conformity, reviewing policy positions and vetting congressional voting.

The right-wing media was purposefully created by the conservative wing of the Republican Party, in part to help resolve a basic contradiction in the movement, according to Grossmann and Hopkins:

Conservative candidates have also long grappled with the challenge of attracting electoral support for an ideological movement primarily dedicated to the perennially unpopular objective of limiting or rolling back major government programs and social benefits.

Grossmann and Hopkins point out that a majority of American voters, when asked about specific policies, support federal spending. An April 2017 Pew Research Center survey, for example, found “that 61 percent of Republicans and 95 percent of Democrats would maintain or increase

funding for health care” and that 61 percent of Republicans and 93 percent of Democrats “would maintain or increase spending for ‘economic assistance to needy people in the U.S.’ ”

Crucial to the continued survival of the Republican Party, however, is the fact that when questions about taxes, spending and the role of government are put in generic, symbolic, abstract terms, without reference to specific policies, the majority of Americans take a conservative stance.

How does this work? Substantially more voters identify themselves as conservative than as liberal, according to Gallup. Gallup also found that the public believes that the government wastes 51 cents of every dollar. In August 2017, Gallup reported that 52 percent of the public had an unfavorable view of the federal government and 29 percent had a favorable view.

To counter potential defections to the Democratic Party, according to Grossmann and Hopkins, the right must focus on “conservatism as a brand name, or as a collection of general principles and values,” which is far more popular “than conservatism as a package of detailed policy positions.”

Arthur Lupia, a political scientist at the University of Michigan, argued in an email that Trump and other Republican insurgents have been better at mobilizing their troops than the establishment wing of the party. The dissident wing, Lupia wrote, has

used social media to organize its myriad members more effectively. Some mass media outlets, and significant social media players, produce a steady stream of polarizing content that keeps members of the group hyper-vigilant towards real and imagined threats from globalists, foreigners, and the American left.

Changes in campaign finance laws have acted in tandem with increasingly independent and influential conservative media outlets to undermine the Republican establishment. The most important of these changes came out of the 2010 Citizens United decision and related court rulings that opened the door to unlimited donations to super PACs, which effectively eliminated the near stranglehold vested Republican interests had on the flow of political money.

This becomes glaringly apparent in a comparison of the pattern of fund-raising in 2008, the last election before the Citizens United decision, to the pattern in 2016. In the 2008 election, the three major Republican campaign committees raised a total of \$657.6 million, six times the \$111.9 millionspent by nonparty conservative organizations.

By 2016, however, the amount raised by the three Republican committees stagnated at \$652.4 million, while the cash raised by conservative groups grew sevenfold to \$810.4 million.

In practical terms, the creation of a new and massive source of campaign support freed candidates to defy the establishment. This is just what the Tea Party did in 2010 and 2014.

There is considerable disagreement over whether deregulated campaign finance and the mobilization of the angriest segment of the Republican electorate will inflict permanent damage on the Republican establishment.

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, wrote me by email. “The establishment, such as it is, still exists, but its influence has been permanently weakened by changes in the media,” not just by conservative media, but by social media that “enables candidates to reach their respective bases in an inexpensive way. Endorsements and money mean less and less.”

Ideological media outlets on both the left and right, Tanner argues “carry more weight than ever before,” displacing establishment influence over candidate selection, because both sides are now more dependent on mobilizing base voters than in persuading the ever-smaller faction of uncommitted voters.

A colleague of Tanner’s, Emily Ekins, director of polling at Cato, argued in an email that

It’s useful to not think of the G.O.P. establishment as a cohesive bloc but rather as a coalition that has been fracturing long before Trump arrived. We saw this with the rise of the tea party, the push to oust former Speaker John Boehner, the House Freedom Caucus, the inability of House Republicans to agree on health care reform, etc. Without cohesion it’s hard for it to control the process.

Ekins points out that Trump’s successful defiance of the establishment in winning the nomination has not resulted in the abandonment of policies favored by the traditional power brokers.

“When it comes to policymaking, traditional establishment priorities appear to maintain influence over agenda setting,” she wrote:

Although reforming the tax system and repealing the ACA (Obamacare) are traditional Republican priorities, these were ranked far lower, below a border wall, among Trump’s core set of supporters. So while the establishment may be hanging back such that they avoid conflicts with Trump, they are still engaged in the policymaking process.

Expanding on this theme in “Intraparty Democracy and the 2016 Election,” Julia Azari and Seth Masket, political scientists at Marquette and the University of Denver, argue that the breakdown of establishment forces has endangered the workings of the political system. Democratization, in other words, has undermined democracy:

It is not without irony that the most recent presidential election produced a result that so violated a great many substantive ideas about democracy. From his campaign promises to jail his opponent to his pre-election lamentations that the general electoral contests were rigged to his vows to strip citizens of their rights for expressing unpopular political views, Donald Trump proved to be one of the most hostile presidential candidates toward basic democratic norms in the modern age.

How “did such democratic parties produce such an anti-democratic result?” Azari and Masket ask. Their answer:

The parties’ moves toward internal party democracy, we maintain, helped create an environment in which a candidate like Trump could succeed. We believe that several aspects of party

democratization are responsible for the inability of the Republican Party to thwart Trump's candidacy.

Put another way, the demotion of Republican power brokers opened the door to the Trump presidency.

In a separate essay, "Weak parties and strong partisanship are a bad combination," Azari wrote:

Voters do not have to listen to elite signals. Elites do not have to listen to each other's signals. Parties have been stripped (in part by their own actions) of their ability to coordinate and bargain.

Not only have party establishments lost their ability to coordinate and bargain, but Trump has successfully pushed the Republican Party elite into a corner. As Masket wrote in an email,

Trump has access to a group of voters that they've been courting for decades — working class whites. They're eager to claim the support of this demographic and, more importantly, terrified to offend it by turning on Trump.

The Trump insurgency, in this context, amounted to an internal realignment or revolution within the Republican Party. What is now the party's largest bloc of voters — whites without college degrees — wrested power from the establishment.

Data provided to The Times by Scott Keeter, a senior survey adviser at Pew Research Center, shows that these non-college white voters cast a solid majority — 62.7 percent — of all the votes Trump received in the 2016 election.

A forthcoming study of Trump's campaign speeches by three sociologists at Harvard — Michèle Lamont, Bo Yun Park and Elena Ayala-Hurtado — found that Trump purposely capitalized "on and appealed to workers' desire to assert what they believe is their rightful place in the national pecking order," including their premier status within the Republican Party.

Henry Olsen, a fellow at the conservative Ethics and Public Policy Center, explained it this way in a January 2018 essay "Hearing the People" in National Review:

Trump's populism was simply the expression of one crucial but underrepresented element of the original conservative coalition, fighting back to achieve some measure of respect and equality.

Sarah Treul, a political scientist at the University of North Carolina, suggested in an email that by failing to take a firm stand against Trump in the early stages of the Republican primaries,

the establishment may have lost its ability to be persuasive in future elections. The insurgence of inexperienced candidates will make it increasingly challenging for the establishment of either party to coordinate around one candidate even if it wants to.

All this raises a larger question: Can the Republican Party continue to function over time without an elite establishment?

Last week, in Politico, Alex Castellanos, the provocative Republican media consultant, made the intriguing argument that it is possible “to harness Trump’s base and add swing voters, even as we remain faithful to our principles.”

As a first step, Castellanos calls for the renunciation of the traditional establishment, a group that converted the Reagan revolution from a movement into a business and then into

a self-preserving racket. In 2016, the American people judged that Washington Republicans had been poisoned by their success and become the very thing they were sent to the Capitol to change.

In Castellanos’s view, the contemporary Republican Party must capitalize on Trump’s successes:

He has crushed ISIS and increased our paychecks with a tax cut. He has erased regulations that were growing Washington’s economy at the expense of our economy. He has appointed a respected Supreme Court justice and transformed the judiciary to call balls and strikes.

But the party must also steer clear of Trump’s failures:

He left behind a vicious inflationary spiral. That, alongside devouring the country’s expectations for a president’s personal conduct, may be the greatest cost of his t. rex presidency.

Permanently reorganizing the party around Trumpism will not be an easy task. Castellanos believes that Trump is likely

to be assessed as the bipolar leader he has become, both one of the worst and best presidents Americans have ever elected, perhaps the greatest president to be removed from the Oval Office in chains.

Reflecting on the tumult, a Republican strategist who has been involved in campaigns at every level for more than 35 years and who is a dues-paying member of the establishment (and thus did not want his name used to avoid alienating his clients), expressed the contradictions of contemporary Republicanism with precision:

The post-Trump world is a Humpty Dumpty story. No one is going to be able to put things back together again.