Republicanism for Republicans

Brink Lindsey

This essay is addressed to those conservatives and Republicans, from leaners to stalwarts, whose loyalties to movement and party are now badly strained or even severed. Perhaps you were blindsided by the rise and ascendancy of Donald Trump, or maybe you’ve had forebodings that were building up over many years. However it happened, at this point you’re clearly on the outs. What was once your political home, or at least a familiar haunt you visited regularly, has been overrun by people or ideas you find repellent. And the things that attracted you in the first place—the intellectual seriousness of the “party of ideas,” the optimism and idealism, the record of real-world policy accomplishments and skillful statesmanship—don’t seem to count for much anymore.

I understand what you’re going through, because I joined the ranks of the disaffected a dozen years ago. Things have gotten so bad, though, that simply throwing up our hands in disgust can’t be enough. The spectacle of Trump and his enablers shouldn’t just be challenged from the outside, by Democrats and the left. It desperately needs to be resisted internally as well, in the name of a decent, responsible center-right.

We cannot simply wait for Trump to pass from the scene, or for Democrats to win big, and hope that things will then somehow go back to normal. We must face the fact that the Trump presidency is not a freak accident, but rather the culmination of developments that have been corrupting the conservative movement and the Republican Party for many years. To root out this corruption, to build a new center-right that can lift this country up to its noblest aspirations instead of dragging it down to its darkest impulses, we must return to our intellectual foundations and build anew from there.

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At stake is not simply the redemption of a great political party, or the effective representation of important constituencies and values. A reconstructed right is needed if we are to halt and reverse the escalating polarization and partisanship that are now tearing our society apart and subjecting our political institutions to severe and ultimately unsustainable stress. In other words, the continued stability and integrity of republican self-government in America are on the line.

**Hiding in Plain Sight**

To build a new, post-Trump right, we need a new political language in which to express ourselves. Where will we find this new vocabulary, which might reach beyond the term “conservatism” as an organizing principle? The answer is right under our noses, hiding in plain sight. The project of intellectual and moral renewal on the right is best founded on the principles of *republicanism*. The challenge is to develop and articulate the principles and program of the republican wing of the Republican Party.

Republicanism, in the most basic sense of the word, simply means support for a republican form of government. This alone, these days, can suffice to position you clearly on controversies of the utmost importance. Beyond that, in intellectual history the term refers to a political tradition in early-modern Europe and North America, stretching from Machiavelli to Madison and Jefferson via Milton, Harrington, Sidney, and Montesquieu.

At the core of this tradition was the ideal of political liberty achieved through popular self-government. This ideal stood in contrast not only to hereditary regimes—kingdoms and empires—but also dictatorships, oligarchies, and direct democracies. Steeped in the classical literature on the example of ancient Rome, republicans saw political liberty not as the expression of some spontaneous general will, but as the artifact of constitutional structure: limits on power, checks and balances, and the rule of law. The structure of liberty is not self-maintaining, however. It rests on the civic virtue of the people, bound together as fellow citizens, who are called upon to uphold the public interest and safeguard it from corruption.

This classical republican political tradition culminated in the American and French revolutions and then receded from history along with its main antagonist, the divine right of kings. Many of its elements
and themes merged into the tradition of liberalism, including both its progressive and conservative strains; others simply gave way to liberalism’s individualism and pluralism. In recent years, a small group of academic philosophers has sought to revive republicanism as a theoretical alternative to liberalism. These scholars, including Philip Pettit and Robert Taylor, have worked to tease out contemporary implications of the old republican worldview, with particular emphasis on the distinctively republican conception of freedom as non-domination.

In American political history, there have been two important political parties that bore the republican name: the Democratic-Republican Party that Jefferson and Madison founded in the 1790s, and today’s Republican Party, formed in the 1850s to oppose slavery. Both parties adopted the republican name for a reason. For the Democratic-Republicans, it was to distinguish themselves from the Federalists and their suspected partiality to hereditary aristocracy. And for the Republicans of Abraham Lincoln’s day, the name contrasted their cause—the original principles of the American republic as enunciated in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—with the “Slave Power” oligarchy of Southern planters, which produced a social order, for most free whites as well as enslaved blacks, that they regarded as antithetical to those principles.

The founding principles of the party of Lincoln are of particular relevance, and not just because it is that same party whose redemption we seek today. The emergence of the Grand Old Party, forged in the crucible of the “second American Revolution” of Civil War and Reconstruction, can be seen as an updating of republicanism for the distinctively modern, distinctively American conditions of a pluralistic commercial society. Older versions of republicanism often exhibited suspicion of or outright hostility to both pluralism and commerce—the former, because it seemed inconsistent with an overarching public good that unites all citizens; the latter, because of fears that the pursuit of private gain would undermine the public virtue on which republican liberty depends.

By contrast, Lincoln and the other early Republicans were enthusiastic participants in party politics; political pluralism was thus basic to their worldview. Further, they celebrated America’s transition from subsistence farming to an integrated market economy. The emerging “free labor” system, in their view, was a school of virtue in its encouragement of social mobility. For his part, Lincoln never forgot his first exchange of labor for wages, when he rafted two men to a steamboat and received a silver dollar
for his efforts. “The world seemed wider and fairer before me,” he later related. “I was a more hopeful and thoughtful boy from that time.”

These historical precedents, along with the present-day boomlet of academic interest, provide the source material for a contemporary public philosophy—basic orientation, broad themes, major concerns—but leave the actual content of a political vision and public-policy agenda wholly indeterminate. All of which makes republicanism the ideal vehicle for renewal on the right at this moment.

There is a pressing need for innovative public policies to meet the demands of 21st-century society, so it is good that republicanism comes with no heavy baggage in terms of specific dogmas and policy commitments. This freedom contrasts with the groaning weight of the baggage now carried by conservatism. Republicanism provides a fresh start, a chance to rethink from scratch what the political program of the American center-right ought to look like. But more than that, republicanism offers a distinctive vocabulary for that fresh start, and one that just happens to fit the times perfectly.

A FAILURE TO CONSERVE

Raising the republican banner immediately focuses attention on the most urgent issue now before us: the declining health and uncertain future of our constitutional republic. The fundamental challenge faced in Madison’s day and then in Lincoln’s—preserving a political union of free people in the face of powerful forces of disunion and unfreedom—confronts us once again. Trump’s depredations have brought matters to a head, but the root of the problem lies in the destructive nature of contemporary political competition.

Our constitutional system, with its separation of powers and intricate checks and balances, relies on elaborate norms of trust and compromise for effective governance to be possible. Over the past several decades, however, the growing alignment of partisan loyalties with the nation’s main racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural divisions has led to increasingly bitter and zero-sum political polarization. The nation is now divided into two hostile camps, and each sees the other as a grave and growing threat to its well-being and way of life. As a result, the norms that lubricate our mechanisms of government have degraded badly, and the mounting frictions threaten the system with worsening dysfunction and even cataclysmic breakdown.
To save and reinvigorate the world’s longest-running experiment in republican self-government, we must break decisively with the perverse dynamics that have led us to this pass. We must start by re-orienting our politics so that partisan identity once again cuts across demographic and cultural identities instead of politicizing them. In addition, we need to recover the elemental civic virtue that makes government by persuasion possible — namely, treating our political opponents as rivals, not enemies.

A republican movement on the right can answer these pressing needs. In contrast to our current politics, which runs on the fanning of hatreds across various dividing lines, republicanism begins with love and unity: the patriotic love of country, a love that unites all of us regardless of party. However much we may differ from one another, however many distinctions we draw among ourselves in a modern, sprawling, pluralistic society, there is one thing that binds all Americans together as moral and civic equals: the res publica, or commonwealth, under whose laws we all live and within whose institutions we can all participate to make those laws better. In the republican worldview, all Americans are “real Americans,” because we all pledge allegiance to “one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” As Lincoln said in his first inaugural address, “We are not enemies, but friends,” because we are all members of one, all-embracing body politic. We’re all in this together.

This civic conception of patriotism stands in stark contrast to the blood-and-soil conception increasingly evident on the conservative right. Conservatives today all too frequently distinguish between “real Americans” — white, native-born, Christian, and disproportionately rural — and the rest of the country, vowing to “take their country back” from fellow citizens they regard as the equivalent of foreign occupiers. Such attitudes and rhetoric are utterly poisonous. They are also deeply un-conservative, given that a creedal rather than ethnic understanding of American national identity is among our oldest and most cherished political traditions. This raises some questions: Why the need for a republican turn on the right? Isn’t it possible to resist populist ethno-nationalism in the name of genuine conservatism?

Of course such a response is possible, and many good conservatives are doing precisely that — if so far with a notable lack of success. The problem is that, under contemporary conditions, the language of conservatism pulls its users naturally and almost irresistibly toward the
ethnocentrism and dark divisiveness we see so much of today. In the rapid social change we’ve been undergoing since the 1960s, one common denominator has been a quest for civic equality by traditionally oppressed and disadvantaged groups — blacks, Hispanics, women, gays. In these circumstances, a political right that expresses itself in terms of conservatism — “standing athwart history, yelling Stop” — slips all too easily into a defense of the status quo by the traditionally dominant groups. This has been a recurring, and recurringly disgraceful, theme of postwar conservatism. Opposition to school desegregation, hostility to the civil-rights movement, excuse-making for sexism, demonization of homosexuality, and most recently a rising tide of intolerance toward the foreign-born — all are black marks in the annals of the American right. This need not be where the intellectual tradition of American conservatism points, of course. But it has too often been where the rhetoric of conservatism has been taken (and allowed) to gesture.

Making matters worse is postwar conservatism’s enduring self-conception as the antithesis of liberalism. Not just its rival, its opposite number, its balance and counterweight — no, in the conservative imagination, liberalism is too often the enemy. From the Buckleyite beginnings of the modern conservative intellectual synthesis, liberalism was presented as an alien, un-American, elitist ideology that was on the same continuum as, and acted as the enabler of and apologist for, totalitarian communism. Since the Cold War ended and communism passed from the scene, the caricaturing has now elevated liberalism to public enemy number one. Today, “owning the libs” has become an end in itself; inflicting a loss on the other side is a victory regardless of the implications for policy or the national welfare.

Obviously, people on the left routinely caricature and demonize conservatives as well. An accounting of the failings and excesses of today’s left would occupy an essay of at least the length of this one. But that is no excuse for anything. This is not just a point about civility. A politics that justifies its own abuses by reference to those of its opposition amounts to little more than a negation.

And even more important, a conservatism that views itself as the negation of liberalism is actually wrong about itself, or at least about the tradition whose name it has taken. American conservatism, at its best, has been about conserving the broad liberal tradition of individualism and the rule of law — both by promoting those essential pre-liberal attachments
to family, faith, community, and nation on which a liberal order depends, and by checking both the excesses of reformist liberalism and the illiberalism of the left. Conservatives have tried to draw a distinction between old, good, “classical liberalism” and new, bad, “modern liberalism,” but the distinction ignores deep and important continuities.

The misconceived blanket opposition to liberalism has made the center-right vulnerable to its own most illiberal elements, which have now remade conservatism in their own odious image. Among the repugnant lowlights: animus against the foreign-born carried to the point of orphaning and caging children; acquiescence in blatant corruption by the president and top officials; mindless trashing of the liberal international order and the global economy; restricting the franchise for some voters rather than insisting it be preserved as the bedrock of a republican form of government and confidently competing for the votes of all Americans; and systematic subversion of the rule of law to stymie investigations of foreign tampering with our elections. It will be very difficult to beat this back, to restore decency and honor to the right, using only the rhetoric of conservatism—especially in its current degraded state.

THE POLE STAR OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST

The rhetoric of republicanism, by contrast, tilts easily in the needed direction. At its emotional core is patriotism, a fundamental moral passion of the right. But with that passion conceptualized in civic rather than ethnocentric terms, republicanism reorients patriotism away from divisiveness and instead enshrines it as a universal, unifying principle.

The conservative right’s ethno-nationalism already generates intense opposition—but from the left, where the critique is marbled with open-borders cosmopolitanism and outright hostility to nationalism of any kind and American exceptionalism in particular. The left’s campaign may ultimately succeed given the trajectory of demographic change in this country, but whether it succeeds or fails, the effect on the right is to strengthen the conflation of patriotism and white identity politics.

A republican movement on the right, on the other hand, can criticize ethno-nationalism as fundamentally unpatriotic and unfaithful to American exceptionalism—that is, in terms that carry real weight with conservatives. Republicanism thus offers an opportunity to actually weaken right-wing attachment to ethno-nationalism internally rather than simply mobilizing against it externally and hoping to outlast it.
And a republican right could do more than just give right-wing ideological arguments for abandoning white identity politics. By refashioning the right’s domestic-policy agenda, republicans could also give voters new reasons to vote Republican and thus reduce the political dependence on pandering to white fears and resentments.

Conservatism, relying heavily on libertarian thinking, now often identifies “small government” as its chief desideratum of economic and social policy: lower taxes to spur initiative, fewer regulations to lighten the load on business, less government spending to reduce dependency and the need for taxes. That orientation was constructive in the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s as pushback against left-liberalism’s infatuation with top-down planning and hostility to the spontaneous innovations and adjustments of competitive markets.

But as liberal suspicion of markets abated, and as structural changes in the economy meant that a rising tide now lifted the rich’s yachts a great deal while ordinary folks’ rowboats rose little or not at all, the idée fixe of small government has risked becoming an intellectual dead end. Rising to the challenge of new conditions means embracing the need for major structural regulatory reform, not so much to unburden business as to expose it to more robust competition by removing regulatory subsidies and barriers to entry. It also means embracing the need for active government in some key arenas— to help people develop the skills they need to thrive in an increasingly demanding labor market, and to provide social insurance that protects people against the inevitable losses and dislocations associated with a dynamic market economy.

Republican principles point the way to a new center-right approach to economic governance. The pole star for republican governance is the public interest, or the common weal—the values that we share across ethnic, regional, sectarian, and class lines and that require collective action for their advancement. As Lincoln, the towering figure of the American republican pantheon, ably summarized the matter, “The legitimate object of government, is to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done, but can not do, at all, or can not, so well do, for themselves—in their separate, and individual capacities.” This is a statement both of the limits of government and of the uses of it.

Relative to libertarian dreams of minimal government, the public-interest standard may seem vague and permissive. But its flexibility is simply a recognition of reality’s messy complexity; libertarian efforts to
delineate the proper role of government within clear, bright lines are as intellectually incoherent as they are hopelessly utopian. The ideal of the public interest, informed by deep republican skepticism of concentrated power, can serve as a powerful constraint on government. Fidelity to a public-interest standard means relentless opposition to the manipulation and takeover of policymaking by insiders, as well as to policies, however well-meaning, that fail to accomplish their stated purposes. Although shrinking government just to make it smaller is not the goal, hostility toward corruption and wastefulness does push toward making government simpler and more transparent.

A new approach to domestic policy is further aided by the republican conception of liberty as non-domination. The basic intuition here is that freedom requires a level of personal independence among the citizenry, and that in turn requires a broad middle class and limited extremes of wealth and poverty. In the republican view, excessive imbalances of power and status undermine government in the public interest because both the rules themselves and their administration will end up slanted in favor of the powerful.

Opposition to domination leads simultaneously toward a deep appreciation of markets and the recognition of a vital supporting role for government. Competitive markets are a bulwark of independence because they encourage a proliferation of options; they are an important check against arbitrary power because they subject market actors to accountability at the hands of their customers. But for market competition to operate as intended, government has a few big jobs to do. First, it must provide and enforce rules that structure and sustain competition; second, it must secure the broad enabling conditions that allow people to participate successfully in the market system and protect them from the hazards of life when their participation goes awry.

These republican ideas can be developed into a rich conceptual framework for active but limited government. The public interest, as an enabling principle, frees center-right policymaking from the libertarian cul-de-sac and reorients it toward problem-solving governance. The public interest, as a limiting principle, then distinguishes center-right problem-solving from the center-left variety by directing attention to the possibility of insider capture and other unintended consequences, and by focusing on policy designs that minimize these pitfalls. An understanding of freedom as non-domination, meanwhile, pushes the
center-right toward greater concern with inequality as a political (as opposed to essentially economic) problem and a clearer recognition of the realities of structural disadvantage.

Republican principles thus supply the intellectual tools the center-right needs to resume the main work of governance: helping real people to improve their lives in tangible ways. And if the center-right can better attend to the material as well as the more-than-material interests of its base among rural voters and the white working class, it will not have to rely on divisive culture-war theatrics to mobilize support.

The detailed contours of a republican domestic agenda cannot be specified now, as that is the work of an actual political movement that would encompass many perspectives and internal debates. But it could easily be home to some significant elements and subgroups of the contemporary conservative movement, as well as to unorthodox voices whose enthusiasm for markets or skepticism of centralized power have not been at home in an increasingly anti-government right.

And while opening up the right to a greater focus on citizens’ material welfare, republicanism can also reliably appeal to social conservatives; political faith based on our shared bonds of political allegiance is naturally suited to serve as a party of order. Support for a stout national defense, valorization of the nation’s protectors in the military and police—these flow naturally from republican themes. Republicanism can likewise embrace traditional values, but with this republican twist: Those values must truly reflect the broad contemporary moral consensus as opposed to a particular, sectarian conception of the good.

Republicanism, then, can stress the importance of family, work, community, and faith—all foundations of social order and incubators of civic virtue. As to those social issues on which there is no broad consensus, but which rather mark the battle lines of cultural conflict, republicanism can serve as a welcoming home for conservatives—but for some social liberals, too.

A NEW HOME

An essay like this can only suggest an idea and sketch out lines for its possible further development. If the idea finds a receptive audience, it will fall to many others to fill in the details. Which is to say, if the general notion of a republican movement on the right strikes you as appealing, you shouldn’t be put off by my particular spin on this or that
issue. At this point, all that really matters is whether the idea of a center-right identity founded on republicanism is worth exploring further.

One thing is for sure: It’s not a quick fix. The challenge that faces any effort to reconstruct the American right is immense. The Republican Party at present is overwhelmingly under the spell of Donald Trump and seems determined to plumb the depths of intellectual and moral self-abasement in the service of a cult of personality. Between this point and the opportunity for any real renewal likely lies sustained electoral failure at the hands of the Democrats. Only repeated repudiation at the polls can break the hold of the populist demagoguery and extreme negative partisanship that has led the Republican Party so badly astray.

If the laws of political gravity have not been abolished altogether, though, the Republican Party’s day of reckoning will come. Indeed, there could be repeated days of reckoning over extended election cycles. In which case, there will be an opportunity for different voices to be heard and new directions to be explored. Will that opportunity translate into real renewal on the right, or just a temporary respite in a downward spiral? The answer turns on whether the appropriate alternative vision is there to seize the moment — one whose ideas are sound and matched to the times, with a larger framing that connects emotionally and intellectually with party regulars and ordinary voters.

The impetus for such changes will not come from today’s Republican establishment, or from the right-wing media complex. A new intellectual movement — one that firmly opposes itself to both ethno-nationalism and plutocracy and offers an appealing vision in their place — is the most promising vehicle for generating and articulating new ideas.

For all those whose home could only be on the right and yet are now politically homeless, it’s time to move past bemoaning what you have lost. It’s time to build a new home.