

The Future of Conservatism

Sep 9, 2024 | ELIZABETH COREY, FEDERICO FINCHELSTEIN, HAROLD JAMES, MAJDA RUGE, and MICHAEL R. STRAIN

PS Quarterly regularly features predictions by experts on a topic of global concern, and this fall, all eyes are on the US presidential election. To many observers, Donald Trump's strong chance of returning to the White House suggests that right-of-center politics has undergone a fundamental change over the past decade. Not only has Trump remade the Republican Party, they argue, but he has inspired a right-wing movement of populist politicians and parties in Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere.

Yet while this "new right" has made gains in many countries, and even come to power in some, its durability remains to be seen. To assess the state of the right in the United States and beyond, we asked contributors whether they agree or disagree with the following proposition:

"Traditional conservatism will stage a comeback."

Elizabeth Corey

I'm no prophet, so the obvious answer is: "We'll have to see." But I would take a slightly different approach to this question. Despite the past decade of turmoil on the political right, I know that there is a large group of people who would say they have never stopped being "traditional conservatives."

These individuals get married, attend church or synagogue, start families, invest in their communities, work hard, engage with their neighbors, and hope that government does not intrude into their lives too much. They are also often deeply involved in politics – but in the politics of the places where they live and can conceivably have an impact. Thus, they may run for local office, or serve on school boards and in civic organizations, or donate to causes whose effects are tangible for them.

Such conservatives may seem to be "missing" from contemporary politics, precisely because they are doing conservative things that need no advertisement. As Shakespeare's Rosalind observes in *As You Like It*, "a good wine needs no bush" – virtuous actions don't need to be trumpeted to the world; they stand on their own. The most self-promoting, critical, angry, or outrageous voices on the right (and left) tend to be the loudest, leading us to think that they are in the majority. Thankfully, I do not think they are.

Still, the great danger at present is that young people will *not* be drawn to the beauty of moderation, but instead toward these loud talkers who claim possession of unalloyed truth. Whichever way we lean – conservative, progressive, or radical – countless writers and propagandists stand ready to confirm and encourage our partisan inclinations and fears. To the extent that young people now live online, I worry that they will encounter fewer traditional conservatives, and thus be less aware of the case for a worldview that, in my view, is far better than any kind of ideological extremism.

Federico Finchelstein

I disagree, at least with respect to the US and other countries – such as Brazil – where a majority of conservatives have betrayed their democratic principles and supported wannabe fascist dictators. To be sure, there are important exceptions, such as the "Never Trump" movement in the US. But, historically, when center-right parties thought they could control or manage far-right extremism, or fell for populist demagogues' promise of "order," they have been too slow to distance themselves from irrational regimes.

In the case of Italian Fascism, consolidating the dictatorship took several years, but it was obvious where things were heading as early as 1924, when Mussolini's supporters assassinated the most important opposition figure, Giacomo Matteotti. Even then, a majority of Italian conservatives and nationalists supported the project. In the

case of Nazism, the transition was accelerated by the same pattern of conservative enablement. As the Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels boasted, fascists used democracy to gain power, then destroyed it.

In the current context, Trump states that he would be a dictator only on “day one,” while promising his supporters that they “won’t have to vote any more” if he is elected. Meanwhile, the pattern of mainstream conservatives running cover for him continues. Like their predecessors in the 1920s and 1930s, they seem to believe that state institutions and legal safeguards will contain fascist-authoritarian impulses. Their forebears were wrong, and mainstream conservatives were inevitably tainted as a result.

Harold James

Alas, traditional conservatism is indeed quite dead – even decayed. The decline was a long one, but it became precipitous after the seismic events of 2016: the Brexit referendum and Trump’s election. The referendum was a non-traditional way of pushing through a radically disruptive political and economic change; and Trumpism is entirely disconnected from the moral values of an older American outlook. Indeed, it *consciously* cultivates a cynical amorality.

At its best, the old conservatism incorporated a sense of tradition, patriotism without nationalism, and concern for the welfare of the entire community. These values were often also intertwined with classic liberalism, in the European sense. Conservatives believed that states should not overextend and thus discredit themselves by micro-interventions, that they should not cater to powerful interest groups, and that governments must live within their means.

But if there were still a few exponents of this sensibility in the mid-twentieth century, they had become rare by the end of the millennium. Two particularly fine interpreters of the tradition come to mind. One was Prince Karel Schwarzenberg, who hailed from an old aristocratic family in Bohemia that was often at odds with the Habsburg monarchy and determinedly opposed to German nationalism and National Socialism. Though the family was exiled from communist Czechoslovakia, Prince Karel returned after 1989. A friend and adviser to the first post-communist president, Václav Havel, he later served as Czech foreign minister and ran (unsuccessfully) for president himself.

The second is Sir Oliver Letwin, a key figure in building the British Conservative-Liberal coalition government of 2010. He was expelled from the Conservatives’ parliamentary ranks by Boris Johnson in 2019 because of his opposition to Brexit.

Both men made a point of always seeking dialogue with the other side in politics, and both, in consequence, were dismissed as eccentrics by people who still called themselves conservatives.

Majda Ruge

Could traditional conservatism make a comeback? Looking at Europe and North America, there is a lot of variation in terms of right-of-center politics, and any general statement runs the risk of oversimplification. Still, I would argue no. The conservative nationalist parties that have made gains across Europe and in the US in recent years represent a “new-right” populism that differs from traditional conservatism in both style and content.

The transformation of the GOP from the party of Ronald Reagan to the party of Trump is a case in point. Openly provocative and informal, Trump claims to represent “common people” against the elite. By definition, he is *against* the establishment that traditional conservatives represented. They were economically liberal, supportive of free trade and immigration, and innately aware of the economic benefits of such policies.

New-right populists, by contrast, are protectionist, hostile to immigration, and inspired by a need for “cultural preservation,” and they have led a political backlash that extends to foreign policy and the global system of multilateral institutions and common rules. Where the pre-Trump GOP was internationalist and committed to cultivating alliances, now it is increasingly isolationist. It tends to see Russia less as a geopolitical threat than as an ideological ally in today’s culture wars.

A similar wave of new-right populism (driven primarily by fear of immigration) is transforming conservatism in Europe. Center-right parties are either morphing into a new, more populist form (as in the United Kingdom), or they are losing support to populist competitors (as in France, Italy, and Germany). Instead of being in any position to stage a comeback, traditional conservatism is being replaced by a very different brand of right-wing politics.

Michael R. Strain

Traditional conservatism will stage a comeback from the beating it has taken since Trump’s rise in 2016. Trump is an enormously powerful political force, but Trumpism is not, and it will not outlast the man himself.

What about J.D. Vance? If Trump wins in November, serving for four years as his vice president will diminish Vance's Trumpian populism, because Trump himself still adheres to much of the traditional GOP policy platform, including tax cuts and deregulation. The GOP's center of gravity – with the important exceptions of skepticism about immigration and an aggressive posture toward China – is still largely where it was when the party was led by Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Mitt Romney.

Political success must rest on a foundation of policy success. Trump's business tax cuts succeeded in increasing investment spending and wages. By contrast, Trump's trade war failed to increase manufacturing employment; in fact, it led to a decline in manufacturing jobs. Because the policies of traditional conservatism work and the policies of Trumpian populism do not, traditional conservatism will return to the political mainstream.

Traditional conservatism in the US conserves the Jeffersonian, Madisonian, and Hamiltonian values of America's founding. American conservatives still hold these values dear. The 2008 global financial crisis, Great Recession, and subsequently sluggish recovery fanned the flames of populism. But as with all populist fires, this one will burn itself out, whereas traditional conservative values will remain.

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