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## Trumpism and the Dual Tracks of American Polarization

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## *Chapter 5*

# Trumpism and the Dual Tracks of American Polarization

*Paul Nolette*

One of the central features of the 2016 presidential campaign was Donald Trump's willingness to push back against established norms about what constitutes proper conduct for a presidential hopeful. Time and again, Trump faced intense criticism from both inside and outside of his party for his various remarks about, for example, the press, race, women, and Muslims. His policy positions diverged from Republican orthodoxy in some key areas, and he criticized major Republican figures like John McCain and George W. Bush throughout the campaign. Although many observers predicted that these norm transgressions would cost Trump key votes from within the Republican coalition, Trump in the end received a share of his own party's voters similar to Hillary Clinton's share of hers. The same Republican officeholders who had belatedly tried to stop his candidacy eventually fell into line behind him by Election Day.

How is it that so-called Trumpism could be both outside of the GOP's mainstream and yet so quickly accommodated by that party's leaders? What does Trump's rise say about the state of contemporary political polarization in America? There are many ways to tackle these questions, but the American political development (APD) concept that the American state consists of "multiple orders" that overlap and interact with one another can help

provide part of the explanation. Analyzing American politics from this APD perspective emphasizes that the American state is not one entity but instead a product of several overlapping institutions, cultural commitments, and policy regimes. These multiple orders operate simultaneously within American politics even though they often conflict with one another, and tensions among these multiple orders contribute to political change over time. Identifying and explaining these shifting patterns of political authority over time, and examining whether these new arrangements stabilize into consistent patterns, comprise a central project of APD.

In this chapter, I focus on multiple cultural orders that have long been part of American political development to help explain the tensions between the Republican elected officials and party leaders (“party elites”) who largely rejected Trump at the start of the 2016 presidential campaign, on the one hand, and the Republican rank-and-file voters who embraced him, on the other. I make two main claims. First, although observers have long noted the growing polarization in American politics, Trump’s rise suggests that polarization among party elites and the mass public is occurring along separate yet parallel tracks. This polarization is *parallel* in the sense that elites and rank-and-file voters alike from both parties have grown more politically distant from their counterparts in the other party. This parallelism is illustrated, for instance, through measures of congressional roll-call voting showing deepening polarization among Democratic and Republican politicians on policy issues and through public polling of the views of self-identified Republican and Democratic voters.<sup>1</sup>

Yet this polarization of elites and rank-and-file voters is *separate* because substantial gaps exist between the cultural traditions emphasized by party elites on the one hand and party voters on the other—particularly among Republicans. Party elites have tended to share a commitment to political ideas based on the American liberal tradition, which emphasizes the importance of individualism using the language of liberty and individual rights as the dominant mode of discourse.<sup>2</sup> The 2016 campaign, however, featured increasingly robust challenges to the liberal tradition because of the popularity of competing cultural traditions among the mass public on both ends of the political spectrum.

The first competing tradition, republicanism, places “the people” at the heart of politics and suggests that the collective wisdom of regular people is superior to the views of the privileged elite. The second, ascriptivism, elevates the importance of racial and gender group identity in politics. Republicanism

and ascriptivism, while long part of America's cultural fabric, were both especially significant elements of the political conversation in 2016.<sup>3</sup> These traditions conflicted with the reigning liberalism among party elites in both parties, with Trump's combination of ideas from both competing traditions posing a particularly significant challenge within the Republican Party. Trump's ascriptive republicanism clashed particularly strongly with the neoliberalism of Republican party elites, both in terms of the policies he favored during the campaign and the rhetoric he espoused. Nevertheless, Trump's positioning proved popular among the Republican rank-and-file as Trump took advantage of widening divisions within the public on issues of cultural and racial identity.

The Republican establishment embraced Trump following his election, however, and continued to do so even through a rocky start to his presidency. This embrace leads to my second main claim: the rapprochement between Trump and Republican party elites occurred in part because the establishment believed that President Trump would govern more like a neoliberal. This prediction has proved largely accurate through the start of his presidency, as his policy positions have largely mirrored past Republican presidencies. At the same time, Trump's rhetoric continued to draw heavily from the republican and ascriptive traditions, frequently threatening to unravel his uneasy rapprochement with Republican party elites.

By addressing how the threads of American cultural traditions appeared in the 2016 election, this chapter shares a similar focus to Gwendoline Alphonso's contribution to this volume.<sup>4</sup> Alphonso examines how Donald Trump is the latest manifestation of an "ascriptive neoliberalism" that had been building within the Republican Party since the 1960s. Alphonso's chapter stresses the *compatibility* of American liberal and ascriptive ideas, providing several examples of how contemporary Republican elites drew upon both sets of ideas to help create a new partisan coalition. This chapter, by contrast, focuses on the *tensions* existing between the liberal and ascriptive ideas that had been brewing within the Republican coalition even before the rise of Trump. By adopting a rhetorical strategy that foregrounded ascriptive ideas rather than liberal ones—the reverse of previous contemporary Republican leaders—Trump exacerbated the tensions between these ideational threads in American politics and made clearer how wide the gap was between the leading ideas of Republican elites and those of the Republican rank and file. The two chapters, read together, illustrate that the recombination of different threads of American political

culture over time provides both opportunities and challenges for political development.

### ***Political Polarization and the 2016 Presidential Election***

There is widespread agreement among scholars and political observers that polarization is both real and growing in American politics. Analyses of Congress, for instance, suggest that the institution is more polarized now than it has been in well over a century.<sup>5</sup> However, there has been debate about whether polarization is mainly a story of increasing divisions among politicians and other political elites, or whether it also reflects increasing divisions within the public. Morris Fiorina has long argued that while polarization is increasingly apparent in elite institutions like Congress, polarization in the broader electorate is exaggerated.<sup>6</sup> He points out, for example, that trends in both party identification and ideological self-identification have remained relatively stable since the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> Others have suggested that polarization runs deeper, extending beyond elite actors to regular voters.<sup>8</sup> Among other things, James Q. Wilson argued that polarization is reflected not simply by trends in voter responses to policy questions, but in increasing voter commitments to groups that are set “definitively apart from people in another, rival group.”<sup>9</sup>

This debate is often framed as the question “Are voters as polarized as elites?” The 2016 election, however, suggests that asking the question in this way masks the different tracks of polarization occurring for both the elites and the mass public. On the one hand, during the 2016 campaign, voters appeared less committed to an ideologically consistent policy program than did party elites. Throughout the campaign, Trump maintained his popularity among the Republican rank and file despite regularly expressing policy views that clashed with the party leaders’ ideological orthodoxy. In numerous speeches, Trump pledged to maintain Medicare and Social Security benefits, in contrast to previous Republican efforts to cut back on the two staples of the New Deal and Great Society.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps Trump’s clearest departure from elite Republican orthodoxy came in the form of his constant attacks on free trade, which included support for tariffs, a desire to scrap free trade deals such as NAFTA, and a willingness to punish companies that moved jobs out of the country.<sup>11</sup> At several points, Trump also praised Planned Parenthood—a frequent target of Republican politicians—for doing “very good work.”<sup>12</sup> That Trump’s ideological flexibility held appeal among Republican voters even while causing consternation among Republican party elites is

consistent with findings that elites are considerably more polarized than the constituents they claim to represent.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, however, certain divisions among Republican and Democratic party elites appeared *less* prominent than among rank-and-file voters. One of the few things Republican and Democratic party elites seemed to agree upon throughout the campaign was the nature of Trump's rhetoric. At numerous points, Republican politicians pushed back on how Trump discussed issues of race, religion, and gender, whether it was his suggestion that a federal judge was biased against him because of the judge's Mexican heritage,<sup>14</sup> his various comments about women,<sup>15</sup> or his proposal that all Muslims should be banned from entering the country because of their religion.<sup>16</sup> Scores of prominent current and former Republican politicians even urged the Republican National Committee (RNC) to cut off funding for Trump following his nomination, citing his "divisiveness" and "recklessness."<sup>17</sup> Yet Trump's divisive rhetoric remained popular among Republican voters. Throughout the fall, Trump maintained similar levels of support among Republican voters as Clinton did among Democratic voters, even as Republican party elites resisted aligning with him.

This dynamic suggests that party elites and regular voters had different conceptions of what constituted "acceptable divisiveness." For Republican party elites, Trump did not display enough policy polarization while going too far in stirring cultural grievances. Rank-and-file Republican voters, meanwhile, embraced Trump's ideological flexibility along with his rhetorical divisiveness. This situation suggests that polarization is operating on separate (though parallel) tracks for party elites and for the mass public, tapping into different sources of division. These different sources, I would suggest, are rooted in the multiplicity of cultural traditions that have long been a part of American society, which can be helpful in analyzing the unusual 2016 presidential campaign.

### ***Candidate Donald Trump and America's Multiple Traditions***

Examinations of American culture often begin with Louis Hartz's famous claim that American political culture is dominated by a "liberal consensus" emphasizing the values of individual rights, freedom, and an orientation to market-driven public policy solutions.<sup>18</sup> Hartz did not suggest that this "consensus" led to a lack of political disagreement—only that these disagreements

relied upon similar liberal principles as a central reference point while ignoring other possibilities (in his view, chiefly socialism).

When Hartz was writing in the 1950s, divisions between the two major parties were narrow enough to spur calls for more “responsible” parties marked by greater ideological differences.<sup>19</sup> This began to change with greater elite-level polarization from the 1970s onward, though this polarization occurred largely within the framework of the existing liberal consensus. Since the 1980s, leaders on the political right gravitated toward one brand of liberalism, neoliberalism, which “privileges the freedoms associated with private property, market relations, and trade across nations.”<sup>20</sup> President Reagan’s first inaugural is perhaps best remembered for his line that “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem”<sup>21</sup>—a philosophy Republicans have relied on to critique alleged excesses of the New Deal and the Great Society. A central project of the modern Republican Party has been to chip away at the public sector through funding cuts and reductions of the role of the public sector in the market. While the modern Republican Party coalition includes important groups favoring other mechanisms to organize society—evangelicals emphasizing religion and tradition being perhaps the most important—one overarching theme held by Republican party elites in the post-Reagan years is preference for private markets.

Democratic party elites in the Reagan era, meanwhile, embraced certain elements of this neoliberalism. Following the Republican triumph in the 1994 midterm elections, Bill Clinton famously stated that “the era of big government is over”<sup>22</sup> and pursued an agenda that drew upon market-based thinking, among them his central welfare reform initiative. Barack Obama likewise modeled several of his policies on ideas originally proposed by pro-market conservatives. The Affordable Care Act, while aiming to provide wider access to health care provision, relied heavily on private insurance markets and the originally conservative idea of the individual mandate. Expansions of the earned income tax credit and proposals for a cap-and-trade system to tackle climate change also reflected the more market-oriented thinking that grew more ascendant beginning in the 1980s.

At the same time, Democratic party elites became increasingly committed to other aspects of the liberal tradition, namely egalitarianism and civil libertarianism. The party embraced a view of individual rights that would “get government out of the bedroom,” including sexual freedoms and abortion rights. Democrats also pushed back on perceived excesses of the national security state during the George W. Bush administration in the name of

preserving civil liberties and the rule of law. Democrats' egalitarian liberalism was evident through the embrace of policies aimed at preventing workplace discrimination and ending bans on same-sex marriage.

Divisions between Democrats and Republicans on these issues increased sharply among elected officials starting in the 1970s, even as this polarization was not as apparent in the general public. But this polarization remained along the dimension of basic liberalism—respect for market processes, private property, individual rights, the rule of law, and so forth. However, while these liberal values have indeed been central to political discourse in the United States, they have long existed alongside other values that sometimes align but often clash with liberal principles. As Rogers Smith's "multiple traditions" thesis put it, American political culture has long incorporated elements of republicanism and ascriptivism in addition to liberalism.<sup>23</sup>

American republicanism, for example, emphasized the welfare of "the people" as opposed to the individualistic focus of the liberal tradition. For the republican tradition, as Gordon Wood described it as existing at the time of the American Revolution, "the solution to the problems of American politics seemed to rest not so much in emphasizing the private rights of individuals against the general will as it did in stressing the public rights of the collective people against the supposed privileged interests of their rulers."<sup>24</sup> Among other things, this emphasis on the primacy of "the people" against their rulers helps explain why early republicans could advocate for broad freedom of speech against "the elites" while simultaneously seeking to punish those speaking out against the true representatives of "the people."<sup>25</sup> This willingness to curtail certain individual liberties to achieve the public good continues to be a key feature of the contemporary American republican tradition—something that has troubled republicanism's liberal critics.<sup>26</sup>

The American liberal tradition has also been challenged by an ascriptive American tradition. As Smith described it, this tradition has both inegalitarian and illiberal dimensions, seeking to link the true meaning of "Americanism" to established social hierarchies, particularly those related to race and gender.<sup>27</sup> These ascriptive ideas have had such strength throughout American political history in part because they have allowed "many Americans to believe that their social roles and personal characteristics express an identity that has inherent and transcendent worth, thanks to nature, history, and God."<sup>28</sup>

Although Smith discussed American ascriptivism largely in reference to ideologies of white supremacy, the rise of an egalitarian form of identity



politics since the civil-rights movement of the 1960s also poses challenges to American liberalism. Contemporary identity politics emphasizes individuals' identity with their particular race, ethnicity, or gender as opposed to broader commitments to an "American creed" based on shared liberal ideologies. This form of ascriptive identity politics often cites liberalism as a roadblock to addressing injustice, advocating instead forms of multiculturalism and ethnic nationalism.<sup>29</sup>

The prominence of each of these three traditions—liberalism, republicanism, and ascriptivism—has ebbed and flowed throughout American history. None of them has ever defined the whole of American political culture, which is better understood as a blend of these multiple cultural visions—a point also made clear in Alphonso's chapter in this volume on "ascriptive neoliberalism" in the contemporary Republican Party.<sup>30</sup> Particular traditions, however, may play a larger or smaller role within the existing political order, depending on how political leaders manage to repurpose elements of each tradition to win votes.

### **The Republican Tradition and the 2016 Campaign**

Throughout the 2016 presidential campaign cycle, the liberal consensus among party elites frayed as other elements of American cultural traditions became a more prominent part of the political conversation. Rhetoric tapping into the communal, group-centered emphasis of American republicanism was shared by insurgent forces in both parties, though by stressing different aspects of this republicanism.

Among Democrats, Bernie Sanders tapped into anger fueled by the party's acceptance of neoliberal ideas. Sanders styled himself a "democratic socialist," though much of his rhetoric tapped into the rhetoric of an egalitarian version of American republicanism as opposed to European socialist traditions. Building upon the Occupy movement ("We are the 99 percent") beginning during the Obama years, Sanders made frequent references to the need for "the people"—whom he envisioned as all Americans who were not at the highest echelons of the income scale—to take back the country from "a handful of billionaires, their Super-PACS, and the lobbyists."<sup>31</sup> Sanders stated that his emphasis was on the "democratic" aspect of "democratic socialism," saying that he supported private enterprise and especially policies that would aid small business. Rather than suggest a socialist program of nationalizing industries, his aim was to reduce corporate elites' influence over

American policy and governance. Contrasting with the civil libertarianism of the American liberal tradition, Sanders argued that curtailing certain liberties of the most powerful in society would serve to bolster participatory governance among the broader American public. A frequent Sanders target was the Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United v. FEC*, which he urged should be overturned to provide regular Americans more of a voice in politics by limiting the free speech of wealthy elites.<sup>32</sup>

Trump also raised republican themes, though his reference point for “the people” was “the forgotten men and women of this country”<sup>33</sup>—the blue-collar whites for whom he would “make America great again.” The republican themes in Trump's rhetoric frequently set him apart from the dominant neoliberal language of contemporary Republican party elites. It was not market forces that ought to play the dominant role in governance, but rather “the people”—particularly those who produced things benefiting American society. Shifting away from the Republican neoliberalism dominant since the Reagan era, Trump criticized free trade agreements and advocated for economic sanctions on countries that treated Americans “unfairly.” He also called for a stronger role for the state in building up production, including increases in infrastructure spending and penalties for corporate elites who eliminate American jobs. This call tapped into long-standing republican “producer ethic” themes elevating those who build and produce for society—farmers, builders, and laborers—over nonproducers who merely profit on the labor of others. Trump's praise of hardworking blue-collar workers who built things, and his criticism of “international bankers” and corporate elites who were taking production out of the country, reflected this theme, suggesting that the former group had the strongest claim to govern. He even referred to himself as “blue-collar,”<sup>34</sup> a seemingly incongruous claim for a Manhattan billionaire, yet one that fits Trump's broader association of this term with those (like himself) who build and produce.

Trump's republican rhetoric set up several clashes with Republican Party leaders. He spoke frequently of how he would be the voice of “the people” against Washington elites, and in doing so displayed a willingness to criticize members of his own party, such as Speaker Paul Ryan, whom he accused of ignoring the will of the people.<sup>35</sup> Trump's call for “draining the swamp” of Washington, D.C., implied that both Republican and Democratic party elites were the problem. Trump's inaugural address tapped into similar republican themes, with references to “the people” throughout: “What truly matters is not what party controls our Government, but whether our Gov-

ernment is controlled by the people.” As he had done throughout the campaign, he represented himself as the people’s true voice, suggesting that “today we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another or from one party to another, but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C., and giving it back to you, the people.”<sup>36</sup>

Trump’s republican rhetoric and claims that he represented “the people” also led him to criticize the media frequently for treating him unfairly. His attacks on the liberal value of the free press, made starkest through his threats to “open up the libel laws” against the media, garnered criticism from members of both parties.<sup>37</sup> Trump’s frequent suggestions that the media was acting “irresponsibly” was in part a reflection of his version of republican civic responsibility, which included criticizing neither “the people” (whom out-of-touch media elites misunderstood) nor the people’s representatives—particularly Trump himself.

The popularity of republican commitments to “the people” on both the political right and left has occurred alongside growing distrust of American political institutions. Since the mid-2000s, the percentage of respondents expressing trust in government “always” or “most of the time” has not exceeded 30 percent, dipping below 20 percent at most points during the Obama era.<sup>38</sup> Few institutions in American society have withstood the general decline in confidence Americans have in them—especially Congress, with approval ratings approaching and sometimes into the single digits.<sup>39</sup> This skepticism of elite-run institutions has helped create fertile ground for appeals in the republican tradition.

### **The Ascriptive Tradition and the 2016 Campaign**

In addition to republicanism receiving more of a hearing across the political spectrum in the 2016 campaign, American ascriptive traditions increasingly challenged liberalism. On the political left, this arose in the form of a robust commitment to group-centered identity politics that emphasized the priorities of specific groups with similar ascriptive characteristics. This egalitarian version of “identity politics” has plenty of crossover with aspects of American liberalism—for example, advocacy for rights of gays and lesbians based upon broad appeals to individual liberty and equality. As Will Kymlicka has argued, strong linkages exist between multicultural theories of group rights and the preservation of individual liberty.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, ascriptive identity politics has clashed repeatedly with the liberal “American creed” as multiculturalism and diversity have become more central elements of American left-wing politics.<sup>41</sup> This tension is illustrated perhaps most concretely in increasing disputes pitting liberal principles of free speech against stronger hate-speech codes aimed at protecting specific groups, especially on college campuses.<sup>42</sup> These battles have split those who see themselves as members of the political left, with some criticizing the group-based emphasis on ascriptive characteristics as ultimately harmful to American liberty and society.<sup>43</sup> These tensions are implicit in much of the debate over racial, ethnic, and gender justice, as advocates of identity politics have criticized the inadequacy of broad-based liberalism in achieving justice.<sup>44</sup>

A politics based upon ascriptive identity has become a more important part of Democratic politics as the party itself has become considerably more diverse over time. When Bill Clinton won in 1992, 76 percent of his party’s voters were white; by the time Hillary Clinton became the Democratic Party nominee, white voters were a bare majority (57 percent) of the party’s rank-and-file.<sup>45</sup> A clear majority of lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender (LGBT) voters identified as Democrats in 2016,<sup>46</sup> and the party has become considerably more religiously diverse as well.<sup>47</sup> Hillary Clinton embraced identity politics throughout her campaign, emphasizing her status as the first female major party presidential nominee and speaking on themes that would appeal to the “rising American electorate” of minority voters, women, and diverse millennials that Barack Obama had brought together in a successful electoral coalition.

As Hillary Clinton embraced a more robust identity politics than previous Democratic candidates, Trump used a very different version of ascriptive politics that proved to be popular among Republican voters, even as it was far less so among Republican party elites. Trump’s rhetoric incorporated ascriptive themes in his initial presidential announcement, in which he stated that “when Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. . . . They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”<sup>48</sup> Trump anti-immigration stance was perhaps his most consistent and prominent policy position, and was based not simply on economic concerns about Americans losing jobs to immigrants, but upon cultural concerns that “they” are not like “us.” Trump’s subsequent policies, including his call for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,” also implied that Muslims, as a group, were outside of the meaning of “Americanism.”<sup>49</sup>

This approach differed from that of previous Republican politicians, who frequently linked their campaign rhetoric to liberal commitments of inclusion and the American creed. A few days after the September 11, 2001 attacks, for example, George W. Bush announced in a speech that “Islam is peace,”<sup>50</sup> and candidates Mitt Romney and John McCain, themselves later Trump critics, explicitly attempted to appeal to those outside their largely white voting base through inclusive rhetoric. Following Romney’s loss in 2012, the Republican Party’s own post-election “autopsy” stressed the need to appeal to a more diverse base of Americans beyond white voters.<sup>51</sup>

To be sure, as Alphonso emphasizes in her chapter in this volume, Republican Party elites have long recognized the power of ascriptive appeals.<sup>52</sup> Richard Nixon’s law-and-order rhetoric, as part of his broader “Southern strategy,” was strongly racially coded. President Reagan’s frequent references to undeserving “welfare queens” during his 1976 and 1980 campaigns were built on widespread racial and gender stereotypes. Nevertheless, even while Republican Party elites engaged in racialized “dog whistles” to win support from white voters harboring racial resentment, mainstream Republican politicians were generally careful to avoid making these appeals explicit. Instead, any racial messages were coded in the language of color blindness permeating mainstream conservative politics throughout the Reagan era, which served as a way to criticize policies benefiting specific minority groups, such as affirmative action.<sup>53</sup>

Yet Trump’s rhetorical strategy took his commitment to ascriptive appeals a step further by shedding the coded racial appeals of his Republican predecessors and making them explicit, causing consternation among Republican politicians. He made several comments about Latinos, Muslims, and women that prominent Republicans like Sen. John McCain and Speaker Paul Ryan refused to defend or outright criticized. Meanwhile, groups well outside of Republican elite circles, including white nationalist “alt-right” groups, embraced Trump’s rhetoric. Trump himself appeared to provide subtle expressions of support for these groups, particularly on Twitter.<sup>54</sup> This interaction between candidate Trump and far-right groups was repeatedly denounced by members of the mainstream Republican establishment.<sup>55</sup>

The success of Trump’s ascriptive language even in the face of Republican Party resistance reflects greater polarization among the American public on deep-seeded issues of culture and identity. As recently as the mid-2000s, for example, roughly equal percentages of Democratic and Republican respondents agreed that immigrants strengthened the country. By 2016, the

gap between Democrats and Republicans on this question reached a remarkable 43 percent.<sup>56</sup> While Americans as a whole are more likely than Europeans to agree that “diversity makes the country better,” Americans are also more ideologically divided on this question. Indeed, the gap between liberals and conservatives on this question was larger in the United States than in any of the European nations recently surveyed.<sup>57</sup> Significant gaps between liberals and conservatives also exist on whether “there is too much attention paid to racial issues,” with Democrats overwhelmingly stating that too little attention is devoted to these issues and Republicans stating just the opposite.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, Trump supporters were the most likely to view blacks negatively, and Republican respondents in general identify prejudice against *whites* as the biggest racial issue facing America.<sup>59</sup>

This ascriptive polarization among members of the mass public reflects in part the growing reliance of the Republican Party on white voters from the South, where hierarchical ascriptive politics has long played a profound role.<sup>60</sup> This polarization also has parallels in European countries, as right-wing populist movements have gained strength on the basis of critiques of diversity and concerns about the decline of cultural identity.<sup>61</sup> What Trump managed to do is harness this growing global polarization about identity issues and meld it with a republicanism that made it a particularly successful and American variant on these broader trends. This ascriptive republicanism proved popular with the Republican rank-and-file, even as it clashed with the broader commitment to liberalism held by the Republican establishment.

### ***The Republican Party and President Trump’s “Governing” and “Rhetorical” Modes***

It seemed reasonable to expect that Trump would have difficulty holding his Republican coalition together after a campaign in which he was actively resisted by elite elements of his own party. In the end, however, the divergence between the preferences of Republican rank-and-file voters and Republican Party elites virtually disappeared by Election Day. Few “never-Trump” Republican party elites held out against him through November 2016, and Trump received a share of the vote from his own party members similar to the share Hillary Clinton received from hers.<sup>62</sup> Though a few high-profile Republican Party elites continued to openly criticize Trump during his first two years in office, such as Senators Jeff Flake (R-Arizona), Ben Sasse

(R-Nebraska), and Bob Corker (R-Tennessee), even they largely voted to support Trump administration priorities.

Trump's strength among Republican voters reflected both the strength of partisan identification in contemporary American politics as well as the intense dislike Republicans had for Clinton despite her explicit attempts to reach out across the aisle to disaffected Republicans. Eighty-eight percent of Republican voters had a "very unfavorable" opinion of Clinton, according to an *Economist/YouGov* poll taken on the eve of the election.<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile, political animosity between members of both parties reached new highs, with record numbers of each party's members holding "very unfavorable" views of the other party.<sup>64</sup> This increasing antipathy was a significant reason why Trump, despite his seeming norm transgressions, could hold together the Republican coalition in the 2016 election.

For their part, Republican Party elites bet on the prospect that Trump's actual policies once in office would diverge less from Republican neoliberal orthodoxy than his campaign rhetoric did. The early part of the Trump Administration suggests that the Republican establishment was largely correct. President Trump's executive-branch nominees were largely drawn from the same elite financial class that he frequently criticized on the campaign trail, and his successful nominations of Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court drew rave reviews from the conservative legal establishment. Meanwhile, Trump provided progressively less influence to controversial advisers who advocated a turn away from existing Republican orthodoxy, including ousting Breitbart News executive Steve Bannon from an official role in the White House.<sup>65</sup>

Trump also backed away from many of the policies he championed during the campaign. Trump supported House Republicans' efforts to dismantle the Affordable Care Act even as it cut Medicaid—one of the key social programs (along with Medicare and Social Security) that he previously pledged not to alter. His proposed 2017 federal budget sought to boost military spending, drastically cut spending on social programs, and lower tax rates on the wealthiest Americans—a budget quite like what a typical post-Reagan Republican president would be expected to propose. Missing from this proposal were other of Trump's campaign pledges that had more potential to clash with Republican neoliberal commitments, such as massive spending on infrastructure or a complete scrapping of existing free trade deals. Trump also backed away from other campaign commitments disfavored by neoliberals, such as his vow to label China a currency manipulator.<sup>66</sup> Even where

Trump most notably did depart from neoliberal orthodoxy—the series of tariffs imposed on China and other trade partners—the relatively small size of the tariffs suggested that they served more of a rhetorical purpose than representing a wholesale shift in American trade policy.<sup>67</sup>

Meanwhile, Trump's few major legislative accomplishments during his first two years supported long-standing goals of neoliberal Republican politicians, including signing into law a tax bill that represented a major victory for House Speaker Paul Ryan and other congressional leaders.<sup>68</sup> While Trump's legislative accomplishments were slim, Trump's appointments to executive agencies engaged in substantial administrative policy making. Agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Education, and the Federal Communications Commission rolled back Obama-era regulations and pursued agendas consonant with the deregulatory goals of the post-Reagan Republican Party.

Trump's policy positions did not entirely back away from the ascriptive republicanism that he advocated on the campaign trail. Most prominently, he announced in the first days of his presidency a travel ban on travelers from seven predominantly Muslim countries, fulfilling one of his most controversial pledges.<sup>69</sup> Trump also suggested that he would direct the federal government to cut funding for so-called "sanctuary cities" that did not comply with strict immigration enforcement.<sup>70</sup> He continued to insist on funding for a new border wall with Mexico, albeit displaying more flexibility on the issue than he did when he made the wall a centerpiece of his campaign.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, Trump's ability to implement these policies was at least temporarily stymied by injunctions granted by federal courts. Despite fears that he would refuse to abide by liberal conceptions of the rule of law—a perhaps justifiable assumption given his campaign rhetoric—he has not yet refused to comply with a court order. In general, Trump has not provided much indication that he is overly concerned with policy, preferring instead to hold campaign-style rallies and to maintain focus on his electoral victory.<sup>72</sup>

President Trump's relative lack of interest in policy has likely empowered the more traditional Republican voices within his administration and helped to steer Trump's "governing mode" in a neoliberal direction. While this aspect of Trump's presidency stayed largely on the neoliberal track amenable to Republican elites, however, his "rhetorical mode" continued to reflect the ascriptive republicanism aimed squarely at the Republican rank and file. Throughout his first two years, Trump's continuing use of ascriptive republican rhetoric continued to cause consternation among the Republican



establishment. As he had on the campaign trail, he picked fights with important Republican leaders such as Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell, setting himself apart from “Washington elites.” Republican leaders also criticized much of Trump’s behavior in office, such as his frequent tweeting about protests by black National Football League players and his failure to condemn white supremacists participating in a rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. On the eve of the 2018 midterm elections, Trump focused much rhetorical attention to a caravan of Central American migrants making their way to the U.S. border, which he claimed consisted of a dangerous mix of criminals and “unknown Middle Easterners.”<sup>73</sup> Trump’s political team created a firestorm of protest when they released a campaign ad referencing the migrant caravan that leaders of both parties roundly denounced as racist and misleading.<sup>74</sup>

The disjunction between Trump’s neoliberal governing mode and ascriptive republican rhetorical mode reflects the Trump administration’s efforts to preside over a party system that has polarized along separate yet parallel tracks. Republicans and Democrats have grown more politically distinct, though with differences in how polarization has operated among party elites and regular party voters. On the one hand, both Republican party elites and Republican rank-and-file voters have polarized in similar ways vis-à-vis the Democrats, as both elected officials and the voters of both parties have grown more politically distant from one another. At the same time, however, the split between party elites and regular voters continues to grow, particularly in Trump’s Republican Party. Trump’s ascriptive republicanism both during the campaign and in office proved popular with the Republican rank and file even as Republican Party elites frequently criticized it. Trump has continued to maintain loyalty among Republican Party elites, however, by pursuing neoliberal policies that look more traditional in contemporary Republican politics.

A key question is whether Trump’s strategy of appealing to elites through his governance while appealing to the rank and file via his rhetoric will be stable in the long term. There are already indications that it will not be, largely because *both* Trump’s governing and rhetorical modes are unpopular with the broader electorate. The Republicans’ proposed health-care plan, which Trump endorsed, proved highly unpopular among the general public and Republican voters alike.<sup>75</sup> The various cuts to government programs Trump proposed in his budget were likewise met with high disapproval in public polling.<sup>76</sup> President Trump’s own approval ratings, never strong to begin with, sank lower as Trump embraced these unpopular policies. Meanwhile, his

frequent tweeting and inflammatory rhetoric during his partisan rallies likely contributed to his unpopularity with the broader public. In the 2018 midterm elections, Trump's general unpopularity contributed to Democrats' capturing the House of Representatives and making significant gains on the state level.<sup>77</sup> Remarkably, Trump's widespread unpopularity has continued despite a strong American economy and has seeped into traditionally Republican suburban districts across the country.<sup>78</sup>

At the midpoint of his presidency, Donald Trump has used different aspects of America's multiple cultural traditions to maintain support from both elites and regular voters of his party. Employing the language of ascriptive republicanism helped him win in 2016 and to maintain strong support from the Republican voting base, while governing largely like a neoliberal has kept Republican Party elites from defecting from his coalition. Given the very different visions these traditions represent, however, Trump's prospects of maintaining a successful balance between clashing orders faces a challenging future.

## Chapter 5

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