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## TCC POLICY BRIEFING

# THE LONG JOURNEY OF THE CONSERVATIVE POPULISTS

BY DR. STEVEN J. ALLEN

*It's time to make the GOP the party of the working class, of small business, of grassroots America*

For conservative populists, it's been a long journey. Soon, if they take advantage of the opportunity that lies before them, they will be dominant in the Republican Party. That's quite a turn for a party that was once seen as the home of privileged elites – of the likes of Rich Uncle Pennybags, the fellow in the top hat in the Monopoly game.

It's been 46 and a half years since Ronald Reagan announced he was running for the 1976 GOP nomination for president. It wouldn't be easy. He was running against a Republican incumbent, and the last sitting president denied nomination at his party's convention was Chester Arthur in 1884.

Ford represented what was then called the Establishment or Country-Club wing of the GOP, the folks we'd now call RINOs or NeverTrumpers. Reagan felt compelled to run because of the direction in which Ford was taking the country. Ford had picked as his vice president Nelson Rockefeller and as his secretary of state Henry Kissinger, two men who sought accommodation with, rather than victory over, the country's enemies. Ford's economic policy was put forth in the "Whip Inflation Now" campaign, in which we fought inflation by wearing WIN buttons and encouraging Americans to stop being so darn greedy. Ford saw himself as working with, rather than seeking the defeat of, the corrupt and intellectually bankrupt crowd that ran Washington, the folks you might run into at a Georgetown cocktail party.

Reagan announced his candidacy on November 20, 1975 in words that echo today, noting that inflation had "more than doubled, at times reaching 10 percent and even more. Government at all levels now absorbs more than 44 percent of our personal income. It has become more intrusive, more coercive, more meddlesome and less effective. Our access to cheap and abundant energy has been interrupted, and our dependence on foreign sources is growing. A decade ago we had military superiority. Today we are in danger of being surpassed by a nation that has never made any effort to hide its hostility to everything we stand for."

Reagan saw “the root of these problems . . . right here in Washington, D.C. Our nation's capital has become the seat of a buddy system that functions for its own benefit – increasingly insensitive to the needs of the American worker who supports it with his taxes. Today it is difficult to find leaders who are independent of the forces that have brought us our problems – the Congress, the bureaucracy, the lobbyists, Big Business, and Big Labor. If America is to survive and go forward, this must change. It will only change when the American people vote for a leadership that listens to them, relies on them and seeks to return government to them. We need a government that is confident not of what it can do, but of what the people can do.”

Ford had never won a popular election outside his congressional district in Michigan, and he had become president as the collateral beneficiary of what was essentially a coup, but, one way or another, he was the president, and Establishment Republicans saw Reagan’s campaign as violating the order of things. In the Republican Party, you were supposed to wait your turn. Interestingly, Ford’s political operation was run largely by people who supported Barry Goldwater in 1964 and took Goldwater’s landslide loss as proof that no conservative could ever be elected president.

Reagan, they assured us, was a threat to all we held dear. One Ford ad, aimed at Californians who had twice elected Reagan governor, said voters should reject him as president because “Governor Reagan couldn’t start a war. *President* Reagan could.” A top official in the Republican anti-Reagan campaign later noted that, “If Reagan were ever nominated, it would be the end of the party. If he were ever elected, it would be the end of the *world*.”

Reagan narrowly lost the nomination to Ford. Four years later, he beat the Establishment candidate George H.W. Bush, whom he selected as his running mate in order to bring the party together. Reagan went on to be the most successful Republican president of the 20th Century.

The Establishment had learned its lesson with Reagan, though, and wouldn’t give up the nomination for 32 years. Bush brushed aside the Reaganite candidate in 1988, Congressman Jack Kemp. That November, Bush rode Reagan’s popularity to victory. But, as president, he purged his administration of most people with Reaganite and populist leanings. He made himself a target of populist Ross Perot, who launched an independent campaign based largely on issues, such as trade, that would later be the foundation for Donald Trump’s candidacy. Perot received 19 percent of the vote, the highest third-party share since 1912. Drawing most of his votes away from the Republicans, Perot threw the 1992 election to Bill Clinton, who won with 43 percent.

Republicans had last won control of Congress in 1952, and most experts would have wagered that they wouldn’t win a majority any time in the foreseeable future, but a Georgia congressman named Newt Gingrich organized a rebellion against his own party Establishment in the House and against the entrenched Democrats. He was elected House GOP whip (deputy leader) in 1989 by a two-vote margin. In

1994, he pushed his party's congressional candidates to run on a joint platform, the "Contract with America," which focused on populist issues such as term limits. After they experienced two years in which Bill Clinton governed mostly from the Left, people who had supported Perot voted overwhelmingly Republican for Congress. Blue-collar workers in many communities voted Republican for the first time. Republicans won, making Gingrich the Speaker of the House.

Two steps forward, one step back: By the 2000s, with Gingrich out as Speaker and with George W. Bush in the White House, the Establishment was largely back in control of the Republican Party. Even institutions of the conservative movement like the Conservative Political Action Conference took on a tinge of the Establishment. Then the costs of the Iraq War began to mount in blood and treasure, and we learned that the government was spying illegally on millions of Americans, and there was a financial crisis, created by government regulators, in which well-connected businesses, deemed "too big to fail," were bailed out while regular people suffered. The Republican brand became toxic, and Barack Obama became president.

Like Clinton before him, Obama campaigned as a moderate and governed as a leftist. That sparked the Tea Party movement, a rebellion against high taxes and Big Government. During the Obama years, Democrats lost a net of 14 Senators, 69 House members, and nine governors, and ended up with the party's lowest share of elected offices since the 1920s.

Still, the GOP was largely controlled by its Big Business/Country Club wing. In 2012, with Obama potentially beatable, the party nominated the hapless Mitt Romney, whose father had run for president as a leader of the Establishment wing. Senate Republican leaders, who owed their majority to the work of the Tea Party movement, spoke of the movement and the people it represented as nuisances. At that point, populists hadn't won a presidential nomination since Reagan's second one in 1984. Jeb Bush was on deck for 2016.

Then came Donald Trump. Running explicitly against the party's power-structure, Trump crushed Jeb Bush and the other candidates for the nomination, and beat Hillary Clinton by carrying 206 counties that Obama won in 2008 and 2012. Trump's margin in those pivot counties was 11.5 percent.

For the first time, the Republican Party was seen as the party of working-class and small-business-class Americans. The populist conservatives who had come together under Reagan, who backed Kemp and Gingrich and the Tea Party movement, were finally moving toward control of the party. But they weren't in control yet. Much of the Republican machinery was still in the hands of the NeverTrumpers, who pushed the Trump's-a-Russian-asset hoax and widespread violation of election rules and who otherwise sought to undermine the President at every turn, with many of them openly or tacitly supporting the election of Joe Biden. (After all, what harm could Biden do?)

Finally, in 2022, there's a chance to put the Republican Party in the hands of those who care more about the concerns of Main Street than Wall Street and Washington's K Street.

Recent party primaries have shown that the Establishment wing of the party has shrunk. Consider these recent primary races for the U.S. Senate: In Ohio, the two top Trump-supporting candidates got 56 percent of the vote, to 21 percent for the top Establishment candidate. In Pennsylvania, the two top Trump-supporting candidates got 56 percent of the vote, to 31 percent for the top Establishment candidate. In North Carolina, there wasn't a significant split within the pro-Trump ranks, and the top Trump-supporting candidate got almost 59 percent of the vote, to less than 25 percent for the top Establishment candidate.

*Politico* on May 7 declared in a headline: "Ohio was a test case for 2024. The GOP establishment looks [skewered]."

Considering the overall results this year, the best guess is that Republicans who have a distaste for Trump make up less than a quarter of the party. "Right now, if you're looking at the anti-Trump capacity or elasticity inside the Republican electorate, it's maybe 20 percent," Kevin Madden, a senior advisor to Romney in 2012, told *Politico*. Of course, the level of like and dislike for Trump is not a perfect measure of populist sentiment – some Republicans strongly dislike Trump for, say, his demeanor – but it shows a marked contrast to 46 years ago, when the populist wing, even with "The Great Communicator" Ronald Reagan as its candidate, couldn't wrest the nomination from an uncharismatic Gerald Ford who was pursuing unpopular policies.

It's time for grassroots Americans to gather together – truckers, farmers, people who work in or run restaurants, police officers, soldiers and sailors and their loved ones, retirees, parents of kids under 18, and all the others who have been reminded in the past year of the importance of having the right people in office. It's time to organize, not just for the November election, but to ensure that future Republican nominees, at all levels from constable to president, are supporters of the principles put forth by Reagan, the Tea Party, and Trump. It's time to flood GOP meetings, to seek party offices ranging from precinct committee member to 2024 national convention delegate, and to gently (or not) push aside the remaining members of the moribund, incompetent Establishment leadership that gave us rule by Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi.

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