

Party Crashers

How Far-Right Demagogues Took Over the GOP

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“Every daily newspaper in the state endorsed a different candidate beside me. It’s taking them a little time to get used to the idea that I was the people’s choice.” One could easily imagine Donald Trump saying that during one of his tirades against the press, or when he insists that, if “illegals” hadn’t cast ballots, he would have won the popular vote. But these words actually belong to former Arizona governor Evan Mecham, who served just fifteen months before the state Senate removed him from office in 1988 for questionable use of campaign contributions, diverting public funds to his car dealership, and obstructing justice.

Mecham and Trump have a lot more in common than their disdain for reporters and a penchant for mixing their businesses with politics. Both perplexed the electorate, the media, and mainstream politicians about whether they were truly conservative. Mecham and Trump—and their followers—were and are undoubtedly a part of the American right. But despite claiming to be conservatives—Mecham did so constantly, while Trump only on a handful of occasions—their quixotic, conspiracy-minded, and often racist rhetoric frequently contradicted the traditions of conservative politics, even as it electrified many middle-class white voters.

Since the mid-twentieth century, practitioners of Trump’s style of right-wing populism have posed a particular dilemma for the Republican Party. Conservative leaders need the votes of their admirers to advance conservative programs. But, unlike right-wing populists, ideological conservatives were less comfortable making flagrantly racist, sexist, and violent statements to win over voters. Inflammatory rhetoric was at odds with the modern conservative movement’s use of a more polite, ostensibly color-blind style to advance its agenda. Populists’ grab bag of (often competing) demands therefore didn’t always align with the GOP’s platform, which tended to favor the wishes of its elite movement leaders, not their white suburban base.

Though it may be hard to figure out whether right-wing populists like Trump and Mecham are a part of the modern American conservative

movement, neither could be called a traditional Burkean conservative. After all, Edmund Burke and his disciples opposed rapid change, whether through the market or the mob. Industrialization, Burke feared, might make the state “nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other such low concern.” But Trump, the builder’s kid, embraces state support for business and has contempt for the pragmatic restraint Burke prized.

President Trump hardly reveres the constitutional order either, which the founders of the republic put in place to guard against capricious change and limit majority rule. The current system of checks and balances still makes enacting a constitutional amendment or even a major law a tortuously slow process. But Trump’s promises to immediately repeal and replace Obamacare, build a wall between the United States and Mexico, and dramatically restrict immigration indicates that he either doesn’t know anything about federalism or really doesn’t care.

American conservatives forged a large and powerful movement built on reverence for those checks and balances, particularly states’ rights. Yet they could not have done so if they had remained faithful to Burke’s suspicion of business and distaste for anti-establishment rhetoric. Fierce opponents of the New Deal fashioned a coalition that they eventually christened conservative. This decidedly elite initiative rejected liberalism, with its support for federal power, unions, entitlement programs, and more citizen participation in government. But conservatives could hardly be called knee-jerk anti-statists. While they may have opposed big government rhetorically, it masked a wish to redirect the power of the state to serve the 1 percent, rather than to abolish it completely. For example, Barry Goldwater, a hero of the right as a senator from Arizona and then the GOP’s 1964 nominee for president, proclaimed himself in favor of freeing markets to lift burdensome regulations and end threats to individual freedom. But his definition of free enterprise included substantial state support for industrial (not social) welfare via generous federal contracts, limits on union power, and tax breaks for industry, offset by raising taxes on homeowners and consumers.

Goldwater, Reagan, and other conservative politicians knew they needed the backing of the kind of right-wing populists with whom they were never really comfortable. During the 1950s, prominent figures on the right disagreed over what to do about the John Birch Society, which retired candy manufacturer Robert W. Welch, Jr. had founded to expose and topple the “cabal of internationalists, greedy bankers, and corrupt politicians” eager to “betray the country’s sovereignty to the United Nations for a collectivist New World Order.” The Birch Society, with anywhere from 60,000 to 100,000 members at its peak in the 1960s, embraced the “conservative” label, only to have William F. Buckley, Jr., editor of *National Review*, deride them as extremists for trading in quixotic conspiracy theories as ridiculous as Trump’s. Yet, the majority of Birch Society activists campaigned hard for

Goldwater's nomination. And he implicitly defended them in his acceptance speech, when he uttered the famous line, "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice."

Right-wing populists may have been a key part of the GOP's post-1964 base but their politics tended to be as fractious and capricious as Trump's. Journalist Andrew Kopkind, along with a handful of other political commentators at the time, identified right-wing populists as the conservative movement's "Frankenstein's monster which no longer does their bidding." They had the most success when they turned the movement's no-government, free-market catch-phrases against its leadership. Mutineers damned liberal Democrats as much as GOP leaders, whom right-wing renegades considered to be betraying the movement's core values of freedom, democracy, and free enterprise. At the local and state level, rebels voted down ballot referenda for infrastructure projects, tax cuts for businesses, and civil rights ordinances, no matter how toothless. They also crowded town hall meetings to demand welfare cuts, property tax repeals for homeowners, obscenity laws, and religious freedom protections. When they ran for office, they, like Trump in 2016, shocked the pundits and pollsters by doing well, sometimes winning both primaries against mainstream Republicans and general elections.

Evan Mecham was one of the most successful of the breed. He first bested Goldwater's generation of Arizona Republicans in 1962, when higher-ups had selected future Nixon loyalist Richard Kleindienst to run for the second Senate seat. Mecham considered his run "not between Republicans and Democrats," whose platforms did not seem all that different to him, "but between those who urge further advances toward Socialism, and those who believe in the creative Conservatism of the American Constitution," which "dignifies the individual citizen." He certainly sounded like a conservative when he pledged to "get government out of business, stop aid to communist countries, and reduce taxes." However, Mecham was actually targeting the kind of federal contracts, business tax cuts, and regulatory repeals that conservatives used to support corporate welfare at taxpayers' expense. He labeled that business-first agenda socialism, just as he did the Democrats' platform. He also took aim at the leadership of both parties, which thrilled white, suburban, primary voters but enraged GOP leaders, who refused to help him win the general election. He lost narrowly to Carl Hayden, the incumbent Democrat who'd been in Congress since 1912. Twenty-four years later, Mecham shocked both politicians and pollsters when he won the governorship in 1986 because he, like Trump, had appealed to Arizonans who believed the major parties had betrayed them.

Two insurgent candidates for president in the same era exploited similar sentiments. Running an independent campaign in 1968 and for the Democratic nomination on three other occasions, George Wallace combined coded racist appeals with celebrations of the hard-working everyman. He



Donald Trump takes the podium at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), February 24, 2017. Photo by Michael Vadon.

also disdained liberals who condescended to the common folk, called for the God-fearing to lead the nation, and demanded both freedom from government interference and an authoritarian policy of law and order. Wallace, like Mechem then and Trump now, appealed to Americans who shared the belief that “there is not a dime’s worth of difference” between parties in the nation’s “Tweedledee and Tweedledum system.” Almost 10 million Americans voted for Wallace in 1968, or 13.5 percent of the electorate—enough to secure forty-six electoral votes from five Deep South states and almost denying victory to Richard Nixon.

In 1992, Ross Perot did not win a majority in any state, although he did take 19 percent of the popular vote. But the straight-talking Texas billionaire was a pioneer in his use of cable TV to broadcast his message, somewhat reminiscent of how Trump perfected the use of Twitter last year. Perot appeared often on CNN, whose novel twenty-four-hour infotainment news platform could hardly have been dismissed as “lamestream media” then. His agenda was a combination of policies from both right and left. He defended abortion rights, called for a balanced budget and gun control, and predicted a “giant sucking sound” of jobs to Mexico if NAFTA were enacted. A Perot presidency would have been as unpredictable as Trump’s, since neither had held elective office before their campaigns, enjoyed support from leaders in either major party, or comfortably fit the label of conservative.

That a right-wing populist captured the GOP and defeated the

uninspiring Democrat nominee is thus part of a longer tradition on the right. What's remarkable is that Trump, unlike Mechem and others of his ilk, succeeded without constantly proclaiming himself to be a conservative. He did so occasionally, which intrigued Democrats and bothered GOP leaders, but hardly mattered to the Republican base or independent voters. Certainly, Trump might prove himself to be a doctrinal conservative in populist clothing. After all, with backing from GOP leaders in Congress, the Wall Street insiders and business executives in his cabinet are pressing to enact the agenda of the corporate right—even if it contradicts Trump's promise to create well-paying jobs for the white working class.

That might be a blessing in disguise. Trump could easily prove to be the kind of demagogue that he sounds like, and continue to evince concern for every white man as he inflicts the kind of authoritarian turmoil that Wallace and Mechem did at the state level years ago. Party leaders didn't stop them then, just like Republicans won't stop Trump now. Only public outrage and organization has dethroned American despots in the past; only sustained progressive activism will continue to do so in the future.

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