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The New Right

Laying the Groundwork for a New Political Order

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- What began after the 2013 GOP autopsy as a loose network of thinkers skeptical of neoliberalism has now placed its champions—most notably Vice President J.D. Vance and Secretary of State and National Security Adviser Marco Rubio—at the highest levels of power under the second Trump administration. Yet, while the New Right has influenced immigration, tariffs, and cultural policy, it remains constrained by entrenched elements of traditional Reagan-era conservatism, particularly in economic and foreign affairs.
- The 2024 election highlighted the movement's weakness as a political force. It did not shape the campaign's message, and it still relies on traditional Republican infrastructure to maintain relevance. Its influence has come instead through personnel pipelines (e.g. Project 2025), strategic alliances (e.g. with Heritage), and a growing network of think tanks and media.
- With Trump term-limited, the coming election will be the first real test of post-Trump conservatism. If the 2028 GOP primary becomes a contest of ideas (not just personalities) the New Right may position itself as the ideological center of the party's future. Whether it can convert intellectual leadership into political legitimacy will determine if the movement becomes the foundation of a durable political order or merely a blip in Republican politics.

American politics periodically undergoes moments of transformation and renewal. According to historian Gary Gerstle, political orders in the United States typically endure for 30 to 40 years, shaping not only government policy but also the ideological boundaries of debate, the behavior of both major parties, and public expectations of the state. In his book *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*[1], Gerstle defines a political order as a period in which a dominant governing philosophy becomes the guiding force of national life—often emerging from crisis and achieving broad elite and public consensus.

By this framework, two political orders have defined modern American history. The New Deal Order, born in the 1930s amid the Great Depression, emphasized government intervention, labor rights, and social welfare, and endured into the late 1970s. It was then displaced by the Neoliberal Order, catalyzed by economic shocks (stagflation, oil crises, and rising debt) that discredited the assumptions of state-led liberalism. The result was an era defined by deregulation, globalization, and market fundamentalism.

Today, many argue we are living through another rupture. Donald Trump's victory in 2016 marked a political inflection point, not merely because of his personal ideology (or the lack thereof), but because of what he represented: a challenge to the neoliberal consensus. The current moment (defined by the growing disconnect between neoliberal promises and the lived realities of many Americans) has given rise to a group of public intellectuals who self-identify as the "New Right." For them, Trump is less a leader than a vehicle to institutionalize a post-neoliberal conservative policy agenda. Whether their project will result in a fully realized political order remains uncertain—but their challenge to the prevailing consensus is unmistakably underway.

[1] Gary Gerstle, The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

While the movement remains in its early stages, its organizing principle appears clear: rebuilding America must begin at its foundation—families. Proponents argue that the nuclear family of middle America has been devastated by economic dislocation brought on by an overreliance on market forces, compounded by the effects of a housing shortage, drug addiction, and illegal immigration. Without strong and stable families, they contend, communities cannot thrive. Without thriving communities, the nation must increasingly divert resources to manage domestic instability. And without a stable domestic base, the country cannot project power abroad or shape the international environment in ways that secure national prosperity. In practice, this is about the remaking the Republican Party into a modern working-class movement.

Trump's second term, however, presents the New Right with an unprecedented opportunity. Unlike his first term (when Trump often spoke like a populist but governed like a conventional Republican) Trump 2.0 is more radical and populist, both in rhetoric and in practice. If policy is personnel, the presence of New Right figures such as Vice President J.D. Vance and Secretary of State and National Security Adviser Marco Rubio reflects the movement's deep influence within the highest levels of government. They now have the authority to shape not just discourse, but policy.

Still, this opportunity comes with profound risks. While Trump's victory has elevated their platform, access to it remains contingent on a volatile and often improvisational governing style. The president's self-interest and managerial unpredictability raise concerns about whether the New Right will have the stability required to translate its ideas into durable policy.

Just as a cohort of insurgent conservatives shaped the neoliberal order in the 1970s, the New Right's ability to institutionalize its agenda over the next three and a half years may determine whether it merely influences the moment—or gives rise to the next enduring political order.

The Beginning of the End for the Neoliberal Republicans

It is helpful to understand the rise of the New Right by tracing a series of political events that catalyzed internal debates within the conservative movement. The first was President Barack Obama's victory over Republican candidate Mitt Romney, then the Governor of Massachusetts, in the 2012 U.S. presidential election. Reeling from two consecutive losses to Obama, Republican leaders initiated a project of self-examination. This effort culminated in the release of the *Growth and Opportunity Project*[2], more commonly known as the "GOP autopsy". The report concluded that the country was becoming increasingly diverse, income inequality was rising, and that the Republican Party needed to become more inclusive and more attuned to the concerns of working- and middle-class Americans. Specifically, it recommended expanding the party's appeal to minority voters, immigrants, and the LGBTQ community, arguing that demographic shifts would otherwise render the party electorally unviable. However, the party's prevailing ideological commitments (to social conservatism, immigration restriction, and a limited government framework that downplayed the role of public policy in addressing structural inequality) made meaningful outreach difficult. As a result, the autopsy was seen by many as a document of political diagnosis without a plausible treatment, further deepening internal divisions within the conservative coalition.

One issue that sharply animated this internal division was immigration. During the 2012 presidential campaign, Romney, responding to anti-immigration voices within the party, endorsed a policy of "self-deportation" for undocumented immigrants—an approach that was widely criticized and seen as alienating to Latino voters. In the aftermath of the loss, Republican leaders attempted to pivot. In 2013, a

[2] Republican National Committee, Growth & Opportunity Project, March 18, 2013, (link)

bipartisan group of U.S. senators known as the "Gang of Eight"[3] introduced an immigration reform bill that would have provided a path to legal status and eventual citizenship for millions of undocumented immigrants. The bill passed the Senate but ultimately died in the House amid mounting conservative opposition. Still, signs emerged that some within the party were taking the GOP autopsy's recommendations seriously. In the lead-up to the 2014 midterms, Rep. Mick Mulvaney, a Tea Party-aligned Republican from South Carolina (and later White House Chief of Staff under President Trump), warned constituents that, "at some point we're gonna have to figure out, if you take the entire African American community and write them off, take the entire Hispanic community and write them off, take the entire libertarian community and write them off, take the entire gay community and write them off, what's left? About 38 percent of the country. You cannot win with 38 percent of the country. We need to stop celebrating the absurd in our party."[4] It appeared, at least at that moment, that elements of the party establishment were moving to implement the autopsy's call for broader inclusion.

A second key moment came in 2014, when House Majority Leader Eric Cantor suffered a stunning primary defeat to David Brat, an unknown economics professor running on a staunchly anti-immigration, anti-establishment platform. Never before had a sitting House Majority Leader been unseated in a primary, and the loss sent shockwaves through the Republican establishment. It signaled the depth of grassroots discontent with the party's leadership and policy orthodoxy—particularly on immigration and trade, two issues where the base increasingly diverged from elite consensus. Those grassroots voices, amplified by far-right media figures like Steve Bannon and Laura Ingraham—both of whom endorsed and actively supported Brat—would become central to the 2016 Republican primaries. In retrospect, Cantor's defeat marked the burial of the GOP autopsy, clearing the way for the rise of a new nationalist, populist movement within the party and laying the groundwork for Trump's first presidency.

The 2016 Republican Primary and the "Reformocons"

During the chaotic 2016 Republican primaries, candidates who supported some form of legalization for undocumented immigrants were swiftly defeated. Florida Governor Jeb Bush and Ohio Governor John Kasich both supported providing legal status to those in the country illegally, while Senators Rubio and Lindsey Graham (both members of the bipartisan "Gang of Eight") were also rejected by the GOP electorate. Ultimately, it was the candidate who called for mass deportations, an end to birthright citizenship, and the construction of a wall to keep out what he described as "rapists" and "drug dealers" who prevailed: Donald Trump. His blunt rhetoric and hardline immigration platform transformed the primary into a referendum on the party's future, exposing the collapse of the autopsy's inclusive vision and signaling a new political alignment grounded in nationalism and cultural grievance.

The electoral dynamics of 2016 accurately reflected the national mood. Among voters who felt abandoned by Washington (many of whom had suffered economic dislocation as factories closed in the wake of globalization) there was a profound sense of alienation. These were the communities Barack Obama once described as clinging to "guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them" and whom Hillary Clinton, during the 2016 campaign, famously referred to as a "basket of deplorables." For many of these voters, immigration served as a proxy issue—not simply about border policy, but a stand-in for broader grievances about cultural displacement, economic marginalization, and loss of national identity. They harbored deep resentment toward a ruling elite they saw as controlling the levers of policy and culture

[3] Sens. Michael Bennet (D-CO), Dick Durbin (D-IL), Jeff Flake (R-AZ), Lindsey Graham (R-SC), John McCain (R-AZ), Bob Menendez (D-NJ), Marco Rubio (R-FL), Chuck Schumer (D-NY).

[4] Mick Mulvaney addressing his constituents at a 2014 Republican Party Breakfast in Goose Creek, SC. (link)

(large corporations, media institutions, universities, and federal bureaucracies) all of which, in their view, tilted the system toward globalization and free trade. These forces allowed companies to offshore production to low-wage countries, while the few remaining jobs at home were, they believed, increasingly filled by undocumented immigrants—further squeezing the American worker. For the children of these left-behind communities, college felt financially out of reach, and many turned to the military, often perceiving themselves as sent to fight the wars of the rich and powerful. Into this mood of despair and betrayal emerged Vance's Hillbilly Elegy, published in June 2016—a memoir chronicling the struggles of the white working class in Appalachia and the Rust Belt. The book quickly became a national bestseller and a cultural touchstone, seen by many as a window into the forgotten heartland—and as an informal explainer for Trump's unexpected rise in American politics.

At the same time, a number of Republican intellectuals and operatives sought to modernize the party's platform. These "reform conservatives" (or "reformocons,"[5] as they were known at the time) retained faith in free markets and globalization, but proposed adjustments such as wage subsidies, expanded child tax credits, and alternatives to Obamacare. One of the most prominent among them was Oren Cass, then a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and former domestic policy advisor to Romney. Cass advised Senator Rubio during his 2016 presidential campaign, helping to shape proposals that departed from the small-government, austerity-driven conservatism that had defined the party since the Reagan era.

Rubio adopted two of Cass's signature ideas: a wage enhancement program akin to a more generous Earned Income Tax Credit, and the "Flex Fund," which would consolidate federal anti-poverty programs into a single block grant, empowering states to craft localized solutions. Yet despite these efforts, Rubio's withdrawal from the 2016 primaries revealed that technocratic reform was no match for the depth of cultural, economic, and institutional discontent animating the Republican base. As one voter famously told a reporter during the primaries: "We don't need ideas. We need someone who fights."

This disconnect between policy elites and grassroots voters paved the way for Trump's rise—and, with it, a new breed of conservative intellectuals determined to translate Trumpism into a coherent ideological and institutional framework.

Early Efforts to Intellectualize Trumpism

After Trump's victory in 2016, a number of conservative intellectuals, grown skeptical of the Republican orthodoxy, saw his presidency as the imperfect yet opportune vehicle to institutionalize their ideas. While many within the party sought to "control" and "normalize" the outsider president, these were the handful of pro-Trump intellectuals at work to "intellectualize" Trumpism, in an effort to transform its populist instincts into a governing framework.

One early effort was the founding of American Affairs, a policy journaled launched by conservative writer Julius Krien. The journal became a platform for public intellectuals who challenged key tenets of the neoliberal consensus, including free-market absolutism, interventionist foreign policy, and open migration. However, these ideas remained peripheral to actual governance.

Instead, the administration was dominated by figures from Wall Street and the Republican foreign policy establishment: Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, and National Economic Council Director Gary Cohn steered a conventional, pro-corporate tax agenda, while national security policy was shaped by establishment hawks like John Bolton and H.R. McMaster.

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[5] James Pethokoukis, "Conservatives like me wanted to reform the Republican Party. What do we do now?," *Vox*, November 14, 2016, (link)

Though some on the emerging New Right saw Trump's presidency as an opportunity to institutionalize their ideas—around immigration restriction, trade protection, or cultural conservatism—they ultimately found themselves sidelined. The result was a presidency that delivered populist rhetoric, but in practice governed through a coalition of neoliberal elites and traditional Republican power centers.

Institutionalizing the New Right

The end of Trump's first term, punctuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 election loss, and the January 6 Capitol riot, appeared to many observers as a potential endpoint for Trump-style populism. But for a growing network of conservative thinkers and activists, it was instead a moment of strategic consolidation. Frustrated by the limited policy gains of Trump's first administration, New Right intellectuals doubled down on efforts to build an enduring institutional infrastructure that could outlast any single politician.

One of the most prominent expressions of this shift was the founding of American Compass in early 2020 by Cass. Departing from the libertarian economics of the Reagan era, Cass and his allies argued for a pro-worker, post-neoliberal conservatism—favoring industrial policy, active labor market support, and strategic decoupling from China. American Compass produced white papers, policy primers, and high-profile forums, gaining traction among younger conservatives and some members of Congress who were seeking alternatives to conventional Republican economic thinking.

Simultaneously, the National Conservatism Conference [6] (NatCon) (organized by Israeli-American political theorist Yoram Hazony) emerged as a central gathering point for the movement. Its inaugural meeting in 2019 was seen as provocative; by the early 2020s, it had become a flagship venue for what Hazony described as a "new public philosophy" rooted in nationalism, tradition, and religion. NatCon attracted elected officials (e.g., Josh Hawley, Vance), media personalities (e.g., Tucker Carlson, Steve Bannon), and thinkers (e.g., Patrick Deneen, Gladden Pappin, Sohrab Ahmari) aligned with the idea that American conservatism had to abandon its fusion with libertarianism and adopt a more assertive, culturally grounded posture.

New publications and emerging media platforms also helped shape the movement's identity. Journals like Compact—co-founded by Sohrab Ahmari and left-leaning editor Matthew Schmitz—signaled a post-liberal realignment that rejected both progressive cosmopolitanism and neoliberal market orthodoxy. Podcasts such as The Realignment, hosted by Marshall Kosloff and Saagar Enjeti, became influential within this intellectual ecosystem, offering a platform for discussions on industrial policy, foreign policy restraint, and cultural renewal. Notably, Cass announced the launch of American Compass on The Realignment, underscoring the role of new media in bypassing traditional conservative gatekeepers. Meanwhile, The American Conservative, long a dissident voice on the right, gained renewed relevance by amplifying New Right positions on foreign policy restraint, economic nationalism, and cultural preservation.

Preparing for Trump 2.0

While efforts to institutionalize the policy foundations of the New Right gained momentum, the movement remained primarily an intellectual and conceptual force rather than a political one. It developed frameworks for how to govern—but not yet for how to win power.

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[6] Event page for NatCon 4, which was held July 8-10, 2024 in Washington, D.C. (link)

This limitation was evident during the 2024 U.S. presidential election. The Trump campaign was driven less by a forward-looking agenda than by the vulnerabilities of the incumbent: President Biden's low approval ratings, economic uncertainty, and the chaotic transition to Vice President Harris. In this environment, there was little appetite for ideological vision-casting—and little space for a movement like the New Right, whose strength lies in ideas, not mass mobilization. To be sure, prominent New Right figures such as Senators Vance and Hawley, and others stumped for Trump in key battleground states. But the election was ultimately a political knife fight, not a contest of ideas.

Instead, the New Right focused its energy on Project 2025, a comprehensive initiative led by the Heritage Foundation to recruit, vet, and position ideologically aligned personnel across the federal government. While Heritage is not associated with the New Right, many New Right-aligned thinkers and institutions (such as American Compass, the Claremont Institute, and American Moment) contributed policy proposals, personnel lists, and thematic guidance.

This collaborative effort underscored both the limits and the adaptability of the New Right. Unable to independently shape the 2024 campaign, the movement instead forged strategic alliances with legacy conservative institutions—even when they did not fully share its postliberal vision. In doing so, the New Right positioned itself not as the driver of the Trump campaign, but as the architect of what comes after. In this light, the New Right's growth may be best understood as a movement undergoing institutional negotiation—attempting to reshape the conservative ecosystem from within while also building parallel institutions (e.g. American Compass, Compact, Claremont Institute).

Governing Blueprint for Trump 2.0

In Trump's second term, several policy proposals championed by the New Right have been adopted by the administration. On immigration, the movement's emphasis on national identity and sovereignty is evident in expanded travel bans and stricter visa regulations. Efforts to reclaim institutions perceived as dominated by leftist ideologies are underway, including the dismantling of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs and significant reforms within the Department of Education. Economic initiatives aimed at revitalizing the manufacturing sector and supporting the working class have materialized through comprehensive tariff policies.

Notably, some New Right figures have taken steps to align with labor interests. Senator Hawley introduced the bipartisan Faster Labor Contracts Act[7], designed to expedite the negotiation process between newly formed unions and employers. The legislation mandates that employers commence negotiations within 10 days of a successful union vote, with provisions for mediation and binding arbitration if agreements aren't reached promptly. This bill has garnered support from major labor organizations, including the Teamsters, signaling a shift in traditional Republican approaches to labor relations.

However, the New Right's influence is not absolute within the Trump administration and the broader Republican establishment. Recent tax legislation passed by the House includes across-the-board tax cuts, benefiting the wealthy and large corporations, alongside reductions in Medicare—policies that diverge from the New Right's economic populism. In foreign affairs, despite attempts to curtail U.S. involvement in overseas conflicts, a significant number of Republican senators continue to advocate for support to Ukraine and sanctions against Russia, reflecting ongoing divisions within the party on international engagement.

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[7] S.844 – Faster Labor Contracts Act (link). Senator Hawley's press release (link).

The New Right - An Unfinished Story

On June 3rd, at Washington's National Building Museum, American Compass hosted its "New World Gala"—a black-tie event marking the think tank's fifth anniversary. The first speaker of the evening, Secretary of State Rubio, addressed a relatively young audience, declaring that the country was in the "midst of an important and long overdue realignment." He was followed by a conversation between American Compass founder Cass and Vice President Vance, who remarked: "This is not a five-, a ten-, this is a 20-year project to actually get America back to common-sense economic policy."

The event was a striking reminder of how a once-marginal circle of conservative intellectuals (tracing its origins to the aftermath of Romney's 2012 loss) has since disrupted the foundations of the neoliberal political order. What began as an insurgent critique has now placed its most prominent advocates at the highest levels of American government.

Alongside President Trump, the oldest person ever inaugurated to the office, stands Vice President Vance, age 41, now second in the presidential line of succession. Standing fourth in that order is Secretary of State and National Security Adviser Rubio, age 54. What began as an intellectual project has evolved into a governing coalition—but the long-term direction of this realignment, and the durability of the New Right itself, remains an unfinished story.

By all accounts, the 2028 presidential election will be the first true post-Trump contest. While it remains possible that a new Trump-like figure could once again channel the populist energy of the working class, the coming election is more likely to serve as a referendum on the Trump era and what follows it. Democrats will likely frame the race as a judgment on Trump's record—and by extension, on the Republican Party's rightward turn under his leadership. Republicans, for their part, will attempt to frame it as a "choice election"—a contest not just of personalities, but of ideas.

In that context, the 2028 Republican primaries may depart from the familiar script of name-calling and personal attacks. Instead, they may become a test of which vision for conservatism resonates most with the party's working-class base. Whether the New Right can meet that moment (translating its governing foothold into electoral leadership) will determine whether this is a passing phase in American politics, or the foundation of a new political order.

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