

## **PATHWAYS OUT OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY**

A look into the conservative imaginary of the American moderate

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A look into the conservative imaginary of the American moderate

By KYLE MORRISON

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AUTHOR: Kyle Morrison  
B.A. (Adelphi University)  
M.A. (University College London)

Supervisor: Dr. Kee Yong

Committee Members: Dr. Neil McLaughlin & Dr. Petra Rethmann

External Reader: Dr. Robert Borofsky

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## Abstract

The dissertation that follows is a result of nearly two years of Zoom interviews with self-identified conservatives and/or former Republicans. In light of the changes brought forth by Trump and the new Republican Party, each of these individuals find themselves without a party to call their own. Situated during the heart of the Covid-19 Pandemic and the 2020 election, it is the story of how Donald Trump hijacked the Republican Party, and the lasting consequences polarization has on democratic institutions such as the United States. By giving voice to those previously silenced by political extremism, I argue in favour of a direct approach to political action using the methods commonly found within Anthropology. In doing so, we give voice to the individual previously silenced by extremism on both ends of the political spectrum.

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thesis manage to convey my debt to them and much more. Naturally, neither of those whom I named above bears any responsibility for any aspects of the contents of this book, the onus of which rests on me alone.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

It is difficult to imagine how a liberal Democrat from Manhattan, New York would end up developing a rapport with former members of the Republican Party. However, in the wake of Trump's 2016 election and rising political extremism, new political allegiances were forged as former political opponents came together to protect American Democracy from the growing threat of authoritarianism. Underlying this shift was an overarching sense of hopelessness, loss, and determination to conserve the values akin to American conservatism and the Republican Party. Leading up to the 2016 election, Trump amassed support from diverse political groups including those who saw in him a chance to escape the familiar patterns of empty promises made by career politicians. Driven by feelings of abandonment and desire, many of these individuals were willing to overlook the contradiction of a millionaire and failed businessman's promises. However, Trump could not have won the 2016 election with just the support of his core base. Like all political candidates, Trump was backed by ordinary rank-and-file members of the Republican Party that were caught up in the wave of solidarity that the American two-party system inspires. Over the next four years, Trump and the actions of the Republican Party tested the loyalty and lengths that members would go to defend him. By demanding absolute loyalty, he drove a wedge between those he considered loyal to him and those loyal to the values of a pre-Trump Republican Party.

In many ways, this is the story of the former Republican and/or conservative voter left behind by the changes Trump brought forth. It tells the story of the fiscal conservative

that has been pushed away by the Republican Party's abandonment of fiscal responsibility. It is the story of the social conservative who rejects the restriction of individual rights and freedoms based on religious principles. It is the story of the moderate who desires balance and compromise but sees only extremism, hostility, and an all or nothing approach not conducive to the advancement of democracy. Finally, it is the story of the unaffiliated whose rejection of the two-party system places them within a zone of political abandonment. Left behind by *their* party, and unwilling or unable to join the opposition, these individuals find themselves abandoned by the system dictated by choiceless decisions.

Considering this, I write this work not only as a piece of academic literature, but also as a platform to support the voices of those who have been silenced by extremism on both ends of the political spectrum. Those of whom I had the opportunity to speak with do not occupy the far-right or far-left as is so commonly the subject of research. Rather they are the "reasonable center" in a world of binaries and political extremism. The stories I tell are meant to provide a sense of community and belonging to those who have been isolated by the lasting trauma of Trump. I consider the voices of my interlocutors who asked me questions like "What have others said?" and "So what have you found out so far? Do others feel the same?" It is meant to help bridge a gap that academia so often neglects in its pursuit of advancing complex theoretical discussions. As Robert Borofsky (2019) argues, the role of the anthropologist should be to engage those we study and not produce literature that alienates us from those we seek to understand. Through the words of my interlocutors, I seek to impart upon the reader the need to challenge our own

political opinions, not only as a means of bridging the divide that figures like Donald Trump have created, but also to escape the bubble that we habitually create through our continuous engagement with like-minded thinkers. Brought together by a common enemy and a shared desire to engage in productive cross-party dialogue, even a liberal like myself was able to find areas of compromise with self-proclaimed conservatives.

I set out with the following research question: what does conservative mean in the eyes of those who now find themselves alienated because of the changes Trump brought to the Republican Party? This was later revised to what *did* conservatism *used* to mean after realizing early on in my conversations with my interlocutors that Trump had shattered any understanding of what the word conservative meant for these individuals. It was quickly concluded that no clear meaning exists in a world where terms like liberal and conservative reflect political, religious, and social ideology. Ultimately, I found myself focusing on self-defining conservative and conservative leaning Americans who no longer feel as though their political beliefs are being represented by the Republican Party. While the body of this dissertation is comprised of interviews gathered over a period spanning from September 2020 to March 2023, the themes covered extend far beyond the initial scope of this study. With Trump declaring his intention to run for president in 2024, the extraordinary phenomenon that the world has come to call Trumpism has without a doubt shifted into the realm of the ordinary. Borrowing from Veena Das (2006) whose writing questions how violence enters everyday life, Trumpism has entrenched itself in the everyday lives of citizens through years of repetitive and

routine behaviours that go against what writers like Reich (2018) call “the common good.”

### *Methods*

When I began my fieldwork, the United States was being ravaged by the Covid-19 pandemic. Even while millions were dying from the virus, Trump and many within the Republican Party continued to downplay the seriousness of the pandemic. Covid-19 exemplified pre-existing structural and systemic violence previously hidden beneath the surface of the ordinary (see Nandagiri et al., 2020). As a result, the amplification of many of these forces proved responsible for my interlocutors’ departure from the Republican Party. Further, the restrictions that Covid-19 imposed significantly disrupted the politics of everyday life. As Bell (2021) argues, the disruption caused by Covid-19 reflects a new application of Van Gennep’s (2019) liminality. Reflecting on their own Covid-19 experience, Bell (2021) proposes that we consider travel disruptions and stay at home orders as a type of liminal moment. This is particularly pertinent as within the United States, as Covid-19 responses correlated to shifts in political identity. Upon exiting this stage of liminality, individuals were marked by polarizing and clearly defined social positions characteristic of reincorporation (Turner, 1969/1995).

As expanded upon in later chapters, Trump’s repeated denial of the pandemic and rejection of public health recommendations created new rifts in communities. It grouped people into categories using salient markers such as masks and social distancing. It arranged people based upon vaccination status and labelled certain jobs “essential.” As a

consequence of this transitional moment, Covid-19 revealed sources of structural violence hidden beneath the veneer of everyday life.

In addition to Covid-19, my fieldwork was defined by the recent trauma created by the instances of exceptional violence. These included the murder of George Floyd, Black Lives Matter protests, and the highest level of gun violence in over 20 years (Bates 2020). When combined with the isolation of Covid-19, these forces generated waves of emotional descriptors that included phrases like “exhausting,” “heartbreaking,” and “a year of missing” (Pfister and Encinosa, 2021). Ousted from the Republican Party and faced with the uncertainty of the looming presidential election, those whom I had the opportunity to engage with painted a similar picture of hopelessness, loss, and displacement as they found themselves caught between two increasingly unfamiliar parties. Parties that spanned beyond the material or physical locality that my interlocutors inhabit. Through the introduction of social media and cable news networks, the conflicts these parties create extend into the virtual and metaphysical realm.

While fieldwork in the traditional sense makes use of a geographical or physical boundary that is defined by the group under study (Markham, 2013), Trump and the political shift that followed transcended the physical boundaries that once defined political communities within the United States. Thus, to enforce a geographical or physical boundary when studying a global political economy greatly undermines the purpose of this research and the impact that the Trump presidency had. As Marcus states, “For ethnographers interested in contemporary local changes in culture and society, single-sited research can no longer be easily located in a world system perspective”

(1998, pg. 5). While the United States is defined by boundaries of statehood, it is not composed of a single political community. The thousands of social and political sub-factions that now make up the United States all contribute to group dynamics and individual political alignment. Each is responsible for separate bonds of loyalty and attachment that create an individual's social and political imaginary. Therefore, it became necessary to expand the scope to include individuals living across the United States. This was made possible by multi-sited ethnography.

While multi-sited ethnography as a research methodology has been praised by proponents such as James Clifford and Michael Taussig (Marcus, 1995), the relevance of this approach merits some discussion in the context of political communities within the United States. As will be discussed, the group in question transcends geographical or physical boundaries. They are part of an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) that spans across the United States and are held together by subjective bonds of solidarity. Yet every four years they are brought together through the ritualized performances that make up the American election cycle. This not only includes physical interactions, but also includes online relationships created by sites like Facebook and Twitter (now relabeled as X). Using these virtual communities, members engage with one another without ever meeting face-to-face. Thus, the virtual not only became its own field site, but also served as a focal point for individuals across the United States to gather in hopes of escaping the violence that had entrenched itself into the everyday lives of these individuals. However, as will be a point of discussion, the virtual proved an additional source of conflict. The communities it fostered further divided the union and increased the spread of

miscommunication. While simplistic and accessible, the language used by online communities catered to personal attacks, hostility, and unproductive behaviors.

### *Covid-19 and fieldwork*

While being physically present allows the anthropologist to observe and collect data from “naturally occurring” discourse, it produces an often-limited assessment of broader socio-political trends and behavioural patterns. With Covid-19 restrictions mandating a strictly virtual approach to fieldwork, the geographical restrictions that might limit the scope of a multi-sited approach were dramatically reduced. However, Covid-19 presented its own unique challenges to conducting fieldwork. As Santos (2021) states, Covid-19 challenged anthropologists to test their technological tool kit. Travel restrictions and social distancing restricted access to physical research sites and limited face-to-face interactions. Although Zoom made it easier to speak with individuals scattered across the country, the familiar “Zoom fatigue” made even the most engaging conversation challenging to maintain for long periods of time. Fieldwork had to be adopted to reflect shorter conversations held over longer periods of time.

Despite its many challenges, Covid-19 also proved beneficial in facilitating the methodology chosen for this research project. With in-person interactions limited, many individuals shifted to zones of virtual interactions including Facebook, Twitter, and Zoom (Dixon, 2022). This was an important factor in assisting with my recruitment process which relied on social media usage. As mentioned, Covid-19 mandated a strictly virtual approach to fieldwork. Unrestricted by travel distance, I was able cover a wider research area. This proved necessary considering that Trumpism spanned the entirety of the United

States and impacted communities at various levels. Unlike traditional fieldwork, single sited ethnography would have limited the scope of this project significantly. Only through virtual fieldwork was I able to achieve the wealth of ethnographic knowledge outlined throughout this dissertation.

While virtual fieldwork allowed for the type of multi-sited ethnography necessary for a project of this scale, it limited access to the small details typically used to bring the field site to life within one's writing. The only sights, sounds, and smells that I observed were limited to those within my small makeshift home office. Not being physically present, I was unable to observe everyday social interactions that structure the lives of the individual. However, as I later make note, the divisions created by Trumpism had already limited many of these interactions. Most interlocutors cited a near total removal of Trump voters from their everyday lives.

Thus, while I was unable to be physically present at each of these sites, virtual fieldwork allowed me to engage with members living in some of the most conservative and remote areas of the country. As will be discussed throughout this dissertation, these individuals had assumed the role of the politically displaced. Ousted by extremist rhetoric that has become mainstream within the Republican Party, many find themselves both politically and physically isolated from those occupying the space around them. In some of the most extreme examples, my interlocutors deemed themselves to be the only non-Trump supporters in their entire community. Had travel to the physical location been required, these sites would not have been chosen and the valuable insight gained through the many conversations I had with these individuals would have been lost. In addition to



an increasingly hostile political environment (see Chapter Six), factors such as Covid- 19 restricted travel and in person social interactions. However, the use of a virtual platform allowed conversations to be held without me directly entering or my interlocutors leaving the “sphere of intimacy” that private dwellings create (Arendt, 1958, pg. 38). The ability for a person to speak with me from the comfort of their own house provided an air of familiarity; thereby streamlining the process by which the anthropologist and interlocutor establish a rapport. This proved particularly valuable considering the progressively hostile environment that made it increasingly difficult to voice political opinions or engage in a politically charged civil conversation.

### ***Recruitment***

To recruit participants, I relied on the previously mentioned imagined communities created through online engagement. In early September of 2020, I created a Facebook page that outlined the guidelines and the purpose of this study. This included contact information, research scope, and the required ethics approval. Using this profile, I joined several Facebook groups whose membership consisted of former Trump voters, former Republicans, and conservative voters. These groups include but were not limited to, “Republicans Against Trump,” “Rational Republicans,” and “Former Trump Voters Against Trump.” Prior to joining these groups, I sought permission from the group administrators, many of whom assisted with promoting my research study. Monitoring these groups, I observed that in many cases, they served as more than just a place for the politically isolated to gather. They also served as a call to action with the goal of creating a united front against the threat that Trumpism posed to the Grand Old Party –

Republican Party (herein GOP). Held captive by the confines of partisan politics in their communities, the virtual realm provided a sense of community as members were able to engage with like-minded individuals. Monitoring the various Facebook groups, sentiments such as “Hoping to connect with people here,” and “I can’t bring myself to talk to my friends when I learned they will be voting for Trump. Are there others here who have felt the same?” were frequently uttered. These groups proved to be an invaluable tool for those seeking to escape the political violence that had entered everyday life. It allowed for members to reaffirm their political views and connect with those of whom they were able to share common feelings of anger, loss, and desire.

While private online groups provided a refuge for those fleeing the politics of everyday life, they also presented an additional source of contention. Trapped by the violent rhetoric of Trump, everyday social interactions became obstructed by the necessity to navigate politically sensitive topics. Trump brought the extraordinary into the realm of the ordinary. As Chapter Six will discuss, the tight knit communities created by sites such as Facebook were cited as one of the root causes of division my interlocutors saw Trump fostering. Sites such as these have created channels that generate political sentiment often at the expense of stoking rather than challenging one’s political opinions. Yet it was not just the online group community, the ability to hide behind the veil of perceived anonymity provided by a screen emboldens individuals to engage in hostile or extremist rhetoric (Lavin, 2020). For those occupying the political center, sites like Facebook invited attacks on issues that spanned beyond the political. As Bail (2022) observed, people who identified themselves as “moderate,” “slightly liberal,” or “slightly

conservative” were 40 percent more likely to report being harassed online than those who identified themselves as “extreme liberals” or “extreme conservatives.” By occupying a space within the middle of the political spectrum, my interlocutors found themselves trapped and/or politically isolated in an increasingly polarized environment.

While social media groups such as these have proven useful in providing a general statistical overview useful for ethnographic work, without the use of conventional ethnographic practices, they are less suited to responding to research questions such as the ones motivating my research (see Postill and Pink, 2012). For this reason, I relied on a series of one-on-one interviews with members of these groups. After joining each group, I published a series of posts asking members interested in discussing what it means to be conservative to contact me. Relying on snow-balling methodology as well as the digital algorithms that sites like Facebook use to promote member engagement, I was able to recruit individuals for this study. Facebook relies on a system of “Likes,” “Comments,” and “Shared” to promote content. The more that a user engages with a particular post the more notoriety the post is given. Thus, the more that members engaged with the initial post, the more members were made aware of the existence of the study. After making the initial post, this self-sustaining method allowed for the recruitment of interlocutors up to several months.

Over the next two months I was contacted by approximately 50 individuals interested in sharing their thoughts and political views. From this original number 35

were chosen for follow-up interviews<sup>1</sup>. No preference was given to factors that included but were not limited to race, religion, location, or gender. Of the 35 who contacted me, only two identified as a person of color with the rest identifying as white. The median age was 55 years old, with 36 being the youngest aged interlocutor and 75 the oldest.<sup>2</sup> During the first interview I asked each potential interlocutor a series of vetting questions designed to determine their eligibility. Each was asked if they were above the legal voting age (18) at the time of the 2016 election. Second, each was asked if planned to vote for Trump in the upcoming 2020 election. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms have been assigned to each and any identifying traits or information removed.

### ***Choiceless Decision***

Having established contact with each of my interlocutors, I began unpacking the complex history of the Republican Party and the American two-party system. In comparison to other world powers, the political system in the United States is somewhat unique in the way that it functions. The United States is dominated by a two-party system that leaves little room for the unaffiliated voter. Representation outside of the two parties is almost non-existent. For a third party to have any hope of representation, it must succeed in winning the entire presidency. This severely limits the emergence of any third

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<sup>1</sup> Of the 50 individuals that voiced interest one later admitted to having voted for Trump in 2020 and was subsequently dropped from the study. This decision was made on the pretense that the scope of this project only included those individuals that had since come to reject Trump. The individual was informed they had been withdrawn and all transcripts destroyed as per their request. The remaining 14 were withdrawn after stating that they no longer wished to be part of the study.

<sup>2</sup> All ages listed are as recorded in 2020.

party within the United States. As such, party members find themselves having to adapt their political ideals to fit within the pre-established political parties. Further, unlike other democratic nations, these two parties are not subjected to congressional accountability. In the United States the presidential candidate is elected by the people and not by parliament or congress. Further, once a candidate receives the political nomination, it is nearly impossible to remove them from power. In such a system, a person does not necessarily need to follow the ideological beliefs of the party. Rather, it falls to the party to support their elected candidate to win the support of voters.

Therefore, as Rees et. al. (2019) emphasize, people in the United States tend to think in dichotomies: Republican versus Democrat, liberal versus conservative. For many, this became the reason behind choosing Trump in the 2016 elections. As I later highlight, choosing a political candidate becomes a choiceless decision in which a person is forced to pick between two options<sup>3</sup>. As one individual told me, “The only reason I don’t register or call myself an Independent is because I feel, nine times out of ten my vote would be wasted. Unfortunately, it’s a two-party system. You have to stand for one or the other.” The forces that structure the American political system make it nearly impossible to completely align one’s values with either of the two political parties. As such, the political identities of my interlocutors are as much theirs as they are pre-written historical

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<sup>3</sup>The term “choiceless decision” is taken from Begona Aretxaga in describing the decision of a group of Irish women protesting at courthouses or police stations. As she emphasizes, their decision to protest was not based on the freedom to protest but because of an existential dilemma: “Many women had small children and had enough with raising their families. They would have preferred to go on with their lives as before, but they had no choice because their husbands were arrested and also their older sons. They had to do something” (Aretxaga, 1997, pg. 61).

circumstances. As Marx (1972) wrote, people “make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (cited by Podgornik-Jakil and Jonas Bens, 2021). Bound by circumstances beyond their control, the choice to support a political candidate and/or party becomes choosing the lesser of two evils. As another individual stated, “When voting for a candidate, you are not choosing a life partner or soulmate, you are choosing the better of two choices.” Voting in the United States is not about choosing a party based strictly on affinity. It is also about choosing a party based on antipathy to the opposition.

Further strengthening this Hobson’s choice, are the binary voter registration guidelines. Certain states require voters to pre-register their political affiliation forcing upon these individuals a particular label or identity. Of the 50 states, nine (Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, and Pennsylvania) operate with a closed primary voting system which requires voters to register with a single party to vote in primary elections. For example, if an individual is registered as a Democrat, they are only allowed to vote in the Democratic primary. A further six states (Oklahoma, Connecticut, Idaho, North Carolina, South Dakota, Utah) have a “Partially Closed” system. This allows each party to choose whether to allow unaffiliated i.e., voters not registered with the party to participate in the primary elections prior to each election cycle. This has the advantage of letting unaffiliated voters participate, while still excluding members registered with the opposing party. Further, a “Partially Closed” system creates additional flexibility for political parties who are then

able to decide each election cycle which groups they want to include. However, this unstructured approach has the potential to create further uncertainty with regards to which group of voters is allowed to participate each cycle. For example, an unaffiliated voter who was allowed to vote in the 2020 Republican primaries, has no guarantee that they will still be allowed to vote in the 2024 Republican primaries. This further encourages voters to align with one of the two dominant parties to ensure participation within each election cycle.

In addition to the two-part system restricting voter choices, there is also the issue of the electoral college. The United States runs its presidential elections in each state using a “winner take all” model. States are worth a set number of electoral “votes” with the winner of each state receiving the states entire electorate count. This usually results in a few states with areas of highly populated cities (mainly New York and California) being reliably Blue (Democrat) while more rural areas swing Red (Republican). Those that lie in the center of this political divide are referred to as swing states. The term swing state refers to states that have the tendency to swap between Democrat and Republican and typically are the primary focus during the electoral campaigns. Speaking to the role of the swing state in political campaigns, Mayer (2007) remarks that not all votes are equal and political campaigns are not for everyone. During each election cycle, millions of dollars are spent campaigning in each of these swing states. For individuals living in these states, there arises an additional feeling of responsibility as one feels obligated to side with one of the two dominant parties. In contrast, those living in reliably red or blue states are

granted the option to vote third party without feeling as though they could have otherwise made a difference in the election.

### ***Political Sociodrama***

The final element of the United States political system is the performative and ritualistic nature of the election cycle. Approximately ten years after Victor Turner (1974/2006) introduced the concept of social dramas as a means of studying political action and the maintenance and acquisition of power, Kertzer (1988) applied the hybrid term “sociodrama” in reference to the American presidential cycle claiming it to be “the greatest political sociodrama and the most elaborate competitive use of ritual in American politics” (pg. 108). Every four years, citizens of the United States are drawn in by rhetoric that offers the symbolic means through which values are tested by potential political candidates (Bailey, 1969). Through nothing less than symbolic manipulation, the rhetoric generated includes discussions over family values, race, worldviews, economic realities, and behavioural norms while the symbolic mythology of these sociodramas tackle issues that are simultaneously political, economic, religious, and even familial (McLeod, 1999). Through these discussions, political leaders are capable of provoking social change by attempting to reinvent, revise, and fine-tune the supposed ideological tenets of their respective parties. As such, terms like conservative or liberal remain highly subjective when used in reference to the ideological platforms of each political party.

The importance of this ritualized sociodrama was brought to light upon further examination of my interlocutors, attitudes towards American politics before and after the elections. Leading up to the elections in both 2016 and 2020 candidates from both parties



sought to distinguish themselves from their opponents to increase support from voters. While the political movements backing these campaigns are ongoing, the presidential campaigns that occur in the months leading up to an election provide a rhetorical and symbolic arena (Bailey, 1969) where voters and candidates are encouraged to participate ritualistically in the complexities of the presidential struggle for power (McLeod, 1991). However, during the interim of these quadrennial sociodramas, interest in presidential politics drops significantly. As little as four months after the election, interest in the political groups I was monitoring dropped approximately 50%. Speaking with one of the moderators for the Facebook groups I was a part of, he also noticed a significant drop-in group activity since the election concluded. This was a sharp contrast to when I began my fieldwork in late August, approximately three months prior to the election. At that time America was at the peak of its presidential performance. Both Biden and Trump were invoking specific language designed to resonate with their supporters (McLeod, 1999) flooding the airwaves with their messages to the American public.

### *Thesis layout*

Before discussing Trump, we must first understand the historical circumstances that led to this point. Besides the Introduction chapter, Chapter Two addresses this by providing a brief history of the Republican Party from Dwight D. Eisenhower up to and including Donald Trump. Rather than provide an excessively detailed overview, I have chosen to focus on specific trigger points in history as well as those relevant to conversations with my interlocutors. The purpose of this review is to provide context about key figures and events that would help give rise to Donald Trump. Chapter Three

breaks away from the historical and examines the origin of conservatism as both a movement and ideology in the United States. I focus on the efforts and writings of figures such as William Buckley Jr., Russel Kirk, Fredrich Hayek, and Frank Meyer, all of whom revolutionized conservatism in the United States. In addition, Chapter Three explores the root of social conservatism, a tenant that has led to some of the most extremist and exclusionary rhetoric within the Republican Party. In doing so, I hope to address a gap in anthropological literature identified through my initial research. While internationally conservatism has risen as a topic of study particularly with ongoing projects on authoritarianism and the far-right, there remains a paucity of anthropological literature on these matters (Bangstat et al., 2019). Further, even less has been done on what I come to define as centrist minded U.S. conservatism. While existing literature on topics such as authoritarianism, and conservatism outside of the United States may prove useful for future research publications, most extends beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Chapter Three ends with a breakdown of the dominant principles within conservative thought. These were identified both through careful review of the literature cited and from conversations with my interlocutors using the question initially raised at the beginning of the research process: “How *did* you define American conservatism prior to Trump taking office?” In doing so, I seek to uplift the voices of my interlocutors whose voices have been silenced by dense theoretical literature and the far-right/far-left. As mentioned, the question was deliberately phrased in such a manner because conservatism, as it was understood and defined by my interlocutors, no longer existed. It had been hijacked by Donald Trump and the Republican Party. However, the political ideals and

values, that have and continue to structure the political imaginary of my interlocutors, have not changed. As I highlight throughout, they are conservative but a conservative without a place to call their own. It is their journey out of the Trump-led Republican Party that this dissertation seeks to address.

Having briefly outlined conservatism as it was defined by my interlocutors, Chapter Four begins the discussion of my interlocutors' exit from the Trump led Republican Party. Using the influential writings of Albert Hirschman (1970) and his Exit, Voice, Loyalty model, I focus my attention on those who voted for Trump in 2016 and have since undergone a shift in political identity. Although Hirschman's work was written about economic forces, it has been adapted for use by political scientists to describe the relationship between citizens and government. Hirschman (1970) presents the argument that in times of dissatisfaction, the consumer may choose between exit and voice. In choosing between these two Hirschman affirms that one of key psychological factors is loyalty towards said party, group, or organization. Determining loyalty, Hirschman claims, is a particularly essential force in situations where there are few or otherwise unfavorable alternatives to choose from as is found-in the United States.

Faced with having to choose between two undesirable choices, an individual might choose loyalty to the party they have previously affiliated with and passively wait for conditions to improve. For those individuals discussed in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, this option remained preferable if they believed that a return to a pre-Trump Republican Party was possible. Secondary to this was the premise that by remaining loyal, the individual is provided with the option to continue invoking their voice. If

exiting removes the option to participate in or be part of the feedback/satisfaction process, then a person may choose loyalty. In the context of the United States, this voice often meant the ability to vote in certain elections that are only open to members of a certain political party. An individual may also choose to exit an organization and seek a more favorable option. Hirschman affirms that in the case of companies that rely on customer loyalty, a large enough exit might force said organization to correct any faults that had led to said exit. However, an individual might postpone their exit in the hopes of being able to use their position as a member of said group to voice their dissatisfaction in the hopes that the party or company will make the desired changes. As is discussed in Chapter Four and Five this same phenomenon was observed among several of my interlocutors as many initially choose to stay with the Republican Party in the hopes of being provided the opportunity to voice their displeasure.

As will be discussed, this becomes particularly powerful in states that use a closed voting system. In such a system, unaffiliated members are locked out of the decision-making process by having their ability to participate in certain elections restricted. Thus, by staying with a party, the individual is provided with a feeling of agency as they continue to exercise the political power given to them. However, as was the case with some of my interlocutors, if it becomes apparent that the desired changes are not being implemented, an individual might feel they have no choice but to exit even if it means giving up their voice. Using this model, I break down the journey each of my interlocutors underwent as they found themselves drifting further and further away from the Republican Party.

Chapter Four and Five follow similar research trends pertaining to political identity by relying on research in social identity theory (Mohamed, 2014) as the basis for establishing a link between the individual and their respective political groups. First established by Henry Tajfel and his student John Turner, social identity theory emphasizes the process by which individuals establish a sense of self based on their group membership. Tajfel (1970) theorized that humans divide the world into “them” and “us” using a process of social categorization and stereotyping. The more similarities that the individual identifies between themselves and another group, greater the likelihood that they will identify as a member of said group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This differentiation becomes particularly important in the context of a two-party system. Without the option to remove an undesirable candidate or rely upon a third political party, an individual is forced to adjust their political identity to align with one of the two dominant political communities. In most cases, choosing a candidate means picking a party that most closely aligns with an individual’s identity – religious, moral, financial, or political values – while also being distinct enough to make the alternative an inviable option for that voter.

This comparative process may also invoke the use of a “prototype” group member. This prototype, real or imagined, must be capable of exhibiting a range of attributes or characteristics common to the group. An individual’s perceived proximity to this prototypical person allows an individual to determine whether one self-categorizes as a member of that group (Lakoff, 1987; Turner, et al., 1987). The existence of this prototype not only shaped my interlocutors’ perception of their proximity to a political

group, but it also served as a means of determining the idealized image of the American conservative. As stressed, conservatism within the American political system is strictly subjective having been formed from an amalgamation of social, political, and religious groups. Therefore, these prototypes are equally subjective and unique to the lives of every individual. Family, community members, political, and spiritual leaders, are all capable of fulfilling the role of prototype. Using this prototype, my interlocutors were able to rationalize their initial entry into their chosen political community and later to justify their exit as they came to realize that conservatism as they had come to define it no longer existed within a Trump-led Republican Party.

As the following chapters highlight, the bonds that my interlocutors share are not structured by religion, race, location, or ethnic origin. Rather, they are forged from a common feeling of loss, betrayal, and hopelessness: loss of the core values that had defined their political identity and membership to the Republican Party, betrayal that the party they had known and loved embraced this new brand of politics, and hopelessness as they are unsure of what the future will hold both for the Republican Party and American democracy. With the violence of Trump's rapid reordering of Republican values and the trauma still fresh in the minds of those impacted, many were left wondering if the conservative values they associated with the Republican Party ever really existed.

## Chapter 2

### History and Party

*I will not speak with disrespect of the Republican Party. I always speak with respect of the past.*

- Woodrow Wilson

Although the focus of this dissertation is on Trump and the period immediately following his presidency, to truly understand Trump and the current Republican Party one must look back to a point where the Republican Party began to shift away from what would be thought of today as a more liberal political platform. For this reason, the second half of this chapter provides a brief history of the Republican Party beginning with President Eisenhower. The Eisenhower presidency (1953-1961) was chosen as a starting point for a historical review for the following reasons. First, the Eisenhower presidency was the first president that the oldest of my interlocutors remember living through. He is part of living memory and the impact he had on their political identity was referenced on multiple occasions. Second, prior to Eisenhower, the Republican Party endorsed what would today be labelled as “liberal” political platforms. As shall be subject of further discussion Eisenhower was the last “liberal” Republican and this shift would be reflected in several of my interlocutors' understanding of what it meant to call oneself a Republican.

#### **Dwight D. Eisenhower 1953-1961**

Dwight D. Eisenhower entered the presidential theatre in 1952. Unlike his political opponent Senator Robert A. Taft, Eisenhower sought to strengthen American

involvement abroad and stood against the isolationist policies of Taft who opposed NATO and wanted little to no foreign entanglement. Ultimately, Eisenhower would go on to win both the 1952 and the 1956 elections in landslides. Despite being a Republican by name, most would find it difficult to classify Eisenhower as anything other than a moderate if judged by 21<sup>st</sup> century conservative standards. As Eisenhower himself said, “In all those things which deal with people, be liberal, be human. In all those things which deal with people's money, or their economy, or their form of government, be conservative.”<sup>4</sup> Eisenhower embraced the seemingly “liberal” elements of the New Deal and even expanded it to include federal aid for education. In terms of his own personal faith and morals, Eisenhower could be called conventionally conservative, showing a limited awareness of the cultural conflicts that would soon engulf the United States (Fawcett, 2020, pg. 291).

However, by the end of Eisenhower’s second term, loose movements of resistance were forming as members of the more conservative right rallied against Eisenhower’s social and economic reformism. From an economic standpoint, these movements drew support from big- business lobbies that had opposed the New Deal and were now opposing the Democrats’ Great Society. Additional support came from Sumner’s (1883) “forgotten man,” i.e., disgruntled middle-class taxpayers, who were fed up with paying for the “undeserving” poor (Fawcett, 2020). Eisenhower would be one of the last “liberal” Republicans elected to office. By the time Eisenhower left office in 1960, the Republican

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<sup>4</sup> Republican Party Platforms, Republican Party Platform of 1956 Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273398>



Party had already begun to slowly shift away from the liberal traditions that led to the New Deal and towards the type of politics currently associated with American conservatism and the Republican Party.

***Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, and Gerald Ford 1964-1977***

Four years after Eisenhower left office, Senator Barry Goldwater stepped forward to run against incumbent Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson. Although Goldwater lost by one of the largest margins in history, his presidential bid was instrumental in changing the Republican Party and marked the end of liberal Republicanism (Fawcett, 2020). Unlike his Republican predecessor, Goldwater strongly opposed the legacy of the New Deal, calling the Eisenhower administration too liberal for a Republican president. A militant anti-communist, Goldwater was thought to be too far-right on the political spectrum and failed to win the support of moderate voters. While Goldwater denounced organizations like the Klu Klux Klan several of its members publicly supported Goldwater for his stance on Civil Rights issues<sup>5</sup>. Despite having voted in favour of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, Goldwater voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964, citing an over extension of government as justification for his stance. As a result, he was cast as an opponent to civil rights by his political rivals (Norton, 2014).

However, Goldwater's opposition to Johnson's civil rights program, and opposition to welfare programs helped him gain popularity in the traditionally Democratic southern states. Prior to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the

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<sup>5</sup> Leffler (1964). Civil rights activists dressed up as Ku Klux Klan members to protest its members supporting the presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater.

Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Republican Party consisted primarily of factory workers, Black voters and farmers holding little to no support from southern white voters. After Lyndon B. Johnson had signed into law both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 the United States saw nearly one quarter of a million new black voters register to vote within just months of the latter's passage (Cavanagh, 1981). Support for the Republican Party shifted as former southern Democrats began to align their platform more closely with the social policies of the former Republican Party. While white supremacy and racism helped drive support for opposition to the above-mentioned acts, so too did concerns about the intrusiveness of the federal government in the everyday lives of individuals (Fawcett, 2020). While much of this was certainly rooted in racial prejudice, prominent Republican leaders were able to build support for the party from the libertarian base which saw the federal movement's enforcement of desegregation as an unconstitutional attack on states' rights.

As President Bill Clinton would later account, "If you look back on the Sixties and think that there was more good than bad, you're probably a Democrat. If you think there was more harm than good, you're probably a Republican" (Heale, 2005). In addition to the passage of the Civil Rights Act and subsequent opposition among traditionally Democratic southern states, the 1960s saw anti-war protests, the women's movement, and the gay rights movement. Each of these only helped to fuel backlash against what was increasingly being associated as liberal traditions within the United States. As such, when Republican candidate Richard Nixon ran for office in 1968, he portrayed himself as a figure of stability thereby appealing to the individual disturbed by what they saw as rapid

social change and violent unrest and upheaval. Running a campaign that called for “law and order” and aided by prominent televised advertisements that played into the performative nature of the US presidential cycle, he appealed to the “forgotten American,” to the “non-shouters, the non-demonstrators . . . those who do not break the law, people who pay their taxes and go to work, who send their children to school, who go to their churches,” (Hall, 2011, pg. 3). Utilizing the Southern Strategy that Goldwater started, Nixon was able to galvanize the anger and concerns of voters particularly in the Southern United States. While Nixon carried the 1968 electoral college count by a wide margin, he only narrowly won the popular vote.

When Nixon took office in 1969, the United States was facing the highest inflation rate (4.7 percent) since the Korean War. With Nixon more invested in foreign policy, he advocated for a federalist approach to economic reform. Nixon proposed grants to states; however, this proposal failed to pass congress (Ambrose, 1987). Unlike later Republicans, Nixon was a supporter of the conservation movement (Rinde, 2017). In 1970 he announced the formation of the Environmental Protection Agency and supported the Clean Air Act of 1970, the National Environmental Policy Act, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. In addition to his domestic policies, Nixon campaigned on the slogan of “Peace with Honor” particularly in relation to the Vietnam War. Nixon instituted what was later known as the Nixon Doctrine, a policy which dictates U.S. foreign military involvement. With the U.S. cracking under the pressure of the Vietnam war, the Nixon Doctrine shifted to a policy that justified outsourcing U.S. military involvement by “look[ing] to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary

responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense” (Nixon, 1969). In doing so, Nixon sought to reduce U.S. involvement in Vietnam while still providing support to the South Vietnamese. The implementation of the Nixon doctrine helped open the door for later forms of U.S. involvement including the Gulf War and the War in Afghanistan (Herring, 2011).

In 1972, Nixon went on to win a landslide victory carrying 49 states and 60% of the popular vote. However, Nixon would be forced to resign from office two years later during what later became known as the Watergate scandal. Watergate encompassed an array of illegal political activities carried out by at least 48 officials, many of whom were members of Nixon’s administration. This included the bugging of political opponents, bribery, and the attempted coverup (Friedman, 1992). Initially, Nixon attempted to deny any involvement however, following the discovery of a tape documenting Nixon’s involvement in the Watergate coverup, Nixon lost nearly all remaining public support. Faced with a looming impeachment and conviction, Nixon resigned from office on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1974. (Perlstein, 2014). Gerald Ford took over for Nixon and would narrowly lose to Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter in the 1976 election.

### ***The Reagan Era 1981-1989***

Both Democrats and Republicans tend to agree that Ronald Reagan was one of the most influential presidents of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to his efforts in rebranding the Republican Party. Assuming office in 1981 after defeating Democratic incumbent Jimmy Carter in 1980, Ronald Reagan went on to reshape American conservatism (Lilla, 2017) by pulling together the “Republican Party’s free-market optimists, ultra-right libertarians,

family—values moralists, and America Firsters” (Fawcett, 2020, pg. 335). Like Nixon, Reagan won the 1980s election by gaining the votes of ex-Democrats who had become disturbed by urban crime and resented the aims of civil rights from non-discrimination to corrective preference. These “New Republicans” were particularly angry at the federal government which they saw as the source of secular, liberal values (Himmelstein and McRae, 1984). While Reagan did not outwardly reject the Civil Rights Bills, he did little to further its progress. Reagan continued the southern strategy that Goldwater started and demonstrated the appeal of this new more radical style of conservative leadership. As a result, when Reagan left office in 1989, the support for the Republican Party was strongest in southern and rural areas of the United States.

While Reagan had help from political aids and sources like *National Review*, his natural gift for public speaking was key in uniting the American public behind his vision of the Republican Party. Reagan excelled at reworking symbols and staging rights which would become key elements of future conservative movements and the GOP (Kertzer, 1988). He helped engage American voters by encouraging them to participate in specific rituals designed to renew their faith in American exceptionalism. These included leading millions of children in the Pledge of Allegiance and encouraging students to not take the freedoms associated with being American for granted (Roberts, 1987). Reagan renewed the public’s faith in the presidency while simultaneously promoting the notion of limited government and individualism. Despite failing to roll back the welfare state, he contributed to a shift in attitudes that prevented its expansion (Hecklo, 2003). However, his real gift was his ability to label “big government” the enemy of the people. Reagan

embraced the libertarian movement and promoted a narrative that a free America meant freedom from government (Packer, 2021). Reagan was able to provide a common enemy for different factions to target all whilst making people forget that it was big government that was keeping him in office (Fawcett, 2020).

Despite this apparent contradiction, Reagan's anti-government rhetoric helped establish the libertarian ideology later associated with the Republican Party. Further, as the next chapter will discuss, Reagan helped to connect neoliberal economics to the Republican Party by fighting to reduce government spending and limit federal regulation. Finally, Reagan firmly cemented the GOP's ties to socially conservative white evangelicals, by attacking the Supreme Court decisions to legalize abortion and uphold the ban on school prayer (Abramowitz, 2010). By the time that he left office in 1989 the Republican Party had become a combination of America Firsters, libertarians, and religious conservatives (Fawcett, 2020) helping to carve a path for a new era in American politics.

In addition to the economic and social policies of the Republican Party, Reagan also proved influential in helping to change the political climate in the United States through his contributions in repealing the Fairness Doctrine. The Fairness Doctrine was a policy that was first introduced in 1949 by the Federal Communication Commission (FCC). It required any individual or organization that held a broadcast licence to present issues of public importance in a manner that was equitable, honest, and balanced. From 1983-1986 Reagan appointed three out of the four FCC commissioners all of whom voted unanimously to repeal the doctrine in 1987. Building upon the anti-government/de-

regulation rhetoric championed by Reagan, the FCC justified its ruling to repeal the doctrine by stating that:

The intrusion by government into the content of programming occasioned by the enforcement of [the Fairness Doctrine] restricts the journalistic freedom of broadcasters ... [and] actually inhibits the presentation of controversial issues of public importance to the detriment of the public and the degradation of the editorial prerogative of broadcast journalists.<sup>6</sup>

When it became apparent that the FCC was about to rule against the doctrine, several members of Congress attempted to codify the Fairness Doctrine, but the bill was vetoed by Reagan.<sup>7</sup> The repealing of the Fairness Doctrine helped pave the way for increasingly one-sided media coverage. Only a year after the bill was repealed, Rush Limbaugh launched the Rush Limbaugh Show and made a name for himself by using his time on the air to promote conspiracy theories, divisiveness, and controversial political rhetoric. It was exactly the type of language that had led to other individuals being taken off the air for having been found in violation of the Fairness Doctrine (Hemmer, 2016).

Yet Limbaugh's success was contingent upon more than just the lack of regulations. Changes in technology also played a role in shifting the way information was passed along. By the 1980s most major music radio networks had switched over to FM creating a gap which led desperate broadcasters to seek new material to draw in listeners (Hemmer, 2016). Furthermore, in 1982, AT&T introduced direct toll free calling for radio talk shows thereby allowing conservative radio hosts like Limbaugh to engage with

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<sup>6</sup> 867 F. 2d 654 - Syracuse Peace Council v. Federal Communications Commission

<sup>7</sup> See Fairness in Broadcasting Act of 1987 S. 742

listeners directly in their efforts to mobilize against the liberal Democrats. These efforts would ultimately pay off as by the end of the century the Republican Party had successfully mobilized a political base centered around issues outside the realm of traditional conservative thought. It would be this base that would later allow individuals like Donald Trump to rise to the ranks of President of the United States backed by a highly mobilized and passionate political base.

### ***Bush and Obama 1990-2016***

By the time Reagan left office the Republican Party and the political climate had been permanently transformed. Reagan was succeeded by George H.W. Bush. Bush failed to live up to the expectations of most voters, serving only one term before losing to Bill Clinton in November 1992. It was during this point that the United States began to experience increased “partisan sorting.”<sup>8</sup> Ideological differences became increasingly polarizing as issues like abortion and LGBTQ2S+ rights dictated party policy. Meanwhile, in Congress a fractious Republican majority led by Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich championed a campaign of obstructionism against President Clinton (Fawcett, 2020). Several scholars have credited Gingrich with accelerating political polarization and undermining democratic norms in the United States (see Theriault, 2013; Zelizer, 2020). Gingrich invoked language that labelled Democrats the “enemy of the people” (Frank, 2004). Gingrich’s “take no prisoner” or “no-holds-barred” leadership broke the unspoken rules of governing in the name of the common good. He frequently

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>



instructed his fellow Republicans to use words like radical, selfish, sick, and traitors to refer to the political opposition (Mason, 2018). This would later result in Gingrich being blamed for two government shutdowns<sup>9</sup> and a subsequent lack of faith in the Republican Party.

Outside of congress, figures like Karl Rove transformed the performative rhetoric of American elections by arguing that elections are won with an energizing group of core supporters and not by groups of swing votes. He helped to promote and implement aggressive attacks on political opponents further dismantling civility and decorum. As Republicans turned to these methods of institutional warfare, it allowed figures like Donald Trump to thrive. After Clinton left office, George W. Bush led the Republican Party to victory in the 2000 election campaign. One year later, on September 11th, 2001, the United States was the target of one of the largest coordinated terrorist attacks in U.S. history. Immediately following the attack, the Bush administration announced the unilateral declaration of a global “War on Terror” in the name of “freedom,” and “democracy.” This type of violent rhetoric in the name of Western democracy was not new. In a reinvention of a longstanding historical tradition that started during the Cold War, the War on Terror was based largely on the threat of an imaginary or fabricated enemy. Before there was terrorism, there was communism. As with communism, there came a clear choice: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” Expanding

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<sup>9</sup> Until 2018-2019 (35 days), the 21-day 1995-1996 shutdown was the longest in US history. Prior to 1995 the longest shutdown ever recorded was 3 days (1990).

the all or nothing rhetoric that individuals like Newt Gingrich started in the 1990s, the Bush administration helped to lay the groundwork for uncompromising partisan policies.

Immediately following the announcement of the War on Terror campaign, the United States entered Afghanistan, leading to a war that would span over two decades. Two years after entering Afghanistan, the United States also declared war on Iraq to the dictator Saddam Hussein. While Bush initially had the support of the American public with a nearly 90% approval rating following the 9/11 attacks, by 2006 support had dropped to nearly 40%. By the time Bush left office in 2008 with polls showing a final approval rating as low as 22% (Gallup, 2009). The growing dissent that two decades of endless war would later generate would help fuel the isolationist policies that would later become normalized under Donald Trump.

As Bush neared the end of his second term in office, Senator John McCain announced that he would once again pursue the Republican presidential nomination. After securing the nomination, he chose social conservative Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential running mate. However, McCain lacked the support of the religious right that carried Bush to the White House in 2000 and 2004. McCain ended up losing to the younger more progressive Barack Obama. When Obama entered the White House in 2008 as the nation's first Black president, he brought with him a message of hope for the progressive members of the Democratic Party.

From 2009 onward, the liberal-minded members of the center right found themselves on the defensive against an increasingly confident hard right (Fawcett, 2020). By 2010 the Tea Party movement had taken off within the United States, driving the

Republican Party further and further right. Many of these movements were started by disgruntled Americans that saw programs like affirmative action and support for immigration as a way for individuals to “cut the line” on their way to achieve the American Dream (Hochschild, 2016). The rhetoric of the Republican far-right shifted to focus on domestic threats such as illegal immigration, and the “radical socialist agenda.” Meanwhile, aiding the spread of these movements were increasingly vocal conservative leaning radio and news stations (Williamson and Skocpol, 2011). As other similar movements took root, they were aided by online media and news networks that paid increasingly more attention to these fringe groups. Fox News quickly became one of the most heavily watched networks in the country and would routinely promote rallies and other events in favor of the Republican Party. Individuals like Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity used their airtime on Fox News to spread misinformation and promote conspiracy theories throughout the presidency of Barack Obama. All of this helped lay the groundwork for someone like Trump who thrived on populist rhetoric, scapegoating, and a large media presence.

***The Rise of Trump and the Far-Right***

*We will make America strong again. We will make America proud again. We will make America safe again. And we will make America great again.*

– Donald Trump

There have been numerous attempts to understand how a man such as Donald Trump succeeded in becoming the President of the United States. Many have sought to explain his success by focusing on his uncanny Trump’s ability to tap into the

performative, symbolic, and ritualistic aspect of the political sociodrama that Kertzer (1988) identified as a key component of the American presidential cycle. While by no means a master of language, Trump's aggressive bombastic style of speech grabbed the attention of the news media keeping him in the spotlight throughout the election cycle. Others see Donald Trump as simply the crest of political extremism that had been building in the United States for decades. Writers like Robert Reich (2018), for example, make the claim that Trump was not the cause but rather the consequence of what has gone wrong. Reich explores what he identifies as a general breakdown of the voluntary social and political norms that members abide by. These norms he refers to as "the common good." Without the presence of the common good, society cannot function (Reich, 2018). The Trump Era embodies the breakdown of the common good as already fragile norms were finally shattered.

Trump ran a campaign in 2016 with the promise of deviating from the political norm. He advertised himself as a "great" businessman with many Americans believing him to be a self-made billionaire indicative of an American Dream success story (McDonald et al., 2019). A master of populist rhetoric, Trump was able to separate himself from the academic and political elite whom many rural voters resented (see Cramer, 2016). While Trump's anti-establishment and business-oriented rhetoric attracted the support of many working-class voters, he also drew support from pre-existing movements that had largely gone ignored by politicians, and academics alike. Decades of multi-axial models of suffering (see Farmer, 2009) and structural violence, had brought the United States political system to the brink of reform. On one axis sat feelings of economic

disparity and abandonment by U.S. deindustrialization and technological advancement (see Walley, 2013). Trump campaigned on a promise to bring back American industry jobs appealing to the blue-collar workers living in historically Democratic strongholds<sup>10</sup> (Gabriel, 2021).

In addition to the economic axis, Trump appealed to a racial and social axis that had been generated through feelings of resentment harboured by predominantly white working-class voters. Much of this anger stemmed from issues such as affirmative action, immigration, and social reform. While it may seem pointless to try and generalize a population as large as Trump's 2016 voter base, one of the common threads that binds many together is the fact that they are angry (Saunders, 2016). They are angry at what they see as a broken political system. They are angry at broken promises and political corruption, and they harboured resentment which was more strongly attuned to nativism, xenophobia, and racism than earlier social movements (Westermeyer, 2021). Rather than just blaming the wealthy one percent or government regulations, Trump shifted the attention of voters by blaming immigrants and foreign nations for the loss of U.S. jobs (Walley, 2017). His campaign rhetoric invoked the symbolic mythology of a lost American greatness and gained him the support of nostalgic, dissatisfied, and angry voters.

The combination of each of these axes allowed someone like Trump to dominate the political theater. Trump was an amalgamation of separate fringe groups, formed and united over decades of reactionary counterrevolutions (Robin, 2011). Even the rhetoric

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<sup>10</sup> In 2020 Trump carried 40 percent of union households.

that Trump used, including his “America First” slogan, was first used by one of the largest anti-war committees – the America First Committee of 1939 – a committee that not only opposed involvement in World War II, but whose membership comprised of pro-fascist and anti-Semitic leaders (Fawcett, 2020). Trump did not create isolationism and racism in the United States, he merely brought them to light (Bell, 2019) and justified them by using a “win at all costs” mentality that first emerged with Barry Goldwater and was later popularized by Newt Gingrich. Likewise, the anti-government conspiracy theories that Trump used to support claims of stolen elections, destruction of civil liberties, and attacks against him are deeply rooted in America’s historical memory. As Lepselter’s (2016) ethnographic stories highlight, these ideas come from a time before the Tea Party, before 9/11, and before Trump. However, unlike with Trump, these stories were not given a platform that facilitated mass exposure.

Trump legitimized these claims by drawing the extraordinary, outlandish, and unthinkable into the realm of the ordinary. This could not have been possible without the use of mass media, online platforms, and 24-hour news coverage. Trump benefited from platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to freely spread his political opinions. Twitter’s character limit of 280 words was perfect for Trump’s “zero-evidential” speech style in which the speaker provides little to no evidence for their claims (McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton, 2020). Sites like Twitter helped Trump to find alternative ways to engage with the masses in the propaganda and symbolism that is inherent to the ritualized American presidential cycle (McLeod, 1999). Using the fame and notoriety he had earned as a TV personality, Trump was able to coast upon a wave that had been building since the likes

of Barry Goldwater (Thrift, 2014). Trump was able to weave together a network of lies to a nation sick of false promises. Finally, Trump's populist rhetoric appealed to people's economic and social anxieties (Oliver and Rahn, 2016) while blaming their problems on the government using similar anti-establishment rhetoric that Ronald Reagan championed (Lilla, 2016). As David Frum (2020) notes, if Reagan mastered the message of hope, Trump mastered a message of fear.

Once he had secured the Republican nomination in 2016, Trump was provided with the power of the entire Republican Party. Without the means to remove him as leader of the party, elected members of the Republican Party were forced to endorse Trump's presidential campaign. Those who did speak out against Trump found themselves ostracized by their fellow Republicans. In what had become part of the political tradition, you were either with Trump or you were with the Democrats. Bound by the limitations and restrictions of a binary political system, even those that were unenthusiastic about Trump during the primary elections, found that he was preferable to a Democratic candidate (Mcveigh and Estep, 2019). It was not just elected officials that fell victim to the trappings of the two-party system. When polled in 2016, only a small percentage of voters said they strongly favoured Trump over Hillary Clinton. Comparing the number of white voters that Democrats lost between 2012 and 2016 with the number gained by Trump in the five Rust Belt States that he carried in 2016, Kilibarda and Roithmayr (2016) note that at least 500,000 voters either stayed home or voted for someone other than the two major party candidates. In short, one of the reasons that Trump won was the general dislike of Hillary Clinton (Wilson, 2017).

For many members of the religious right, voting for Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton would mean betraying their stance on key social issues like abortion. It did not matter that Trump did not attend church nor did it matter that he was not known to be a family man, he was the face of the Republican Party, and the Republican Party was “pro-life.” Trump carried the support of Evangelical voters, many of whom aligned their own religious beliefs with pragmatic and single-issue policies such as anti-abortion and preservations of supposed American Christian values. For the economic conservative, voting Democrat in 2016 would have meant abandoning the values of a free market and limited spending. Once again it did not matter that Trump had a long history of economic bankruptcy and business failings. As a Republican candidate, he was the symbol of American fiscal conservatism and the Republican Party. As polling in 2016 showed,<sup>11</sup> Trump’s electoral college victory was not due to an enthusiastic voting base, it was due to a willingness to accept him as the better of unlikable alternatives.

During the four years that Trump was president, the United States was marked by violence, contradictions, and civil unrest. Following through on his promises to rollback government regulations, Trump cut funding to the Environmental Protection Agency and weakened existing environmental regulation (Popovich et al., 2019). Trump successfully appointed three new conservative Supreme Court Justices allowing for the overturning of Roe V. Wade in 2022. Further, Trump implemented several anti-immigration policies that resulted in thousands of children being separated from their parents at the US-Mexico border (Shear et al. 2018). During the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Trump fought

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<sup>11</sup> Realclearpolitics-Election 2016 favourability ratings



to downplay the severity of the virus leading to the deaths of thousands of Americans. Finally, following the murder of George Floyd, Trump responded to the nationwide protests with comments such as, “when the looting starts, the shooting starts” (Milman et al., 2020). As members of the Republican Party lost faith in a Trump led Republican Party, many found themselves leaving in search of a political party that they felt more closely aligned with their political values. For those alienated by Trump, Joe Biden represented a return to normality and the status quo.

Although Trump would end up losing both the electoral and popular vote in 2020, he still maintains a strong presence within the Republican Party. On August 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022, Liz Cheney, one of the most outspoken Republicans against Trump lost her bid for re-election to a Trump backed candidate after being ostracised by members of her party. As with Bush and the War on Terror, either you were with Trump’s Republican Party, or you were against it. With this all or nothing approach to governing, compromise and bipartisanship has become nearly impossible. However, it was not just the lack of bipartisanship that has come to define the Trump era. Trump created his own brand of policies and practices. Trump thrived on his ability to sell "alternative facts" to his voting base. Whether it be downplaying the existence of Covid-19 or refusing to accept the results of the 2020 election, Trump has fostered an environment of distrust, conspiracy, and denial. In 2020, only 41% of Republican voters stated that they were confident that votes would be counted accurately (Benen, 2021). As the Republican voting base embraced this distrust of democratic institutions, elected officials lean into these claims and normalize this rhetoric at an institutional level. Even after being indicted on 91 (and

counting)<sup>12</sup> federal charges, support for Trump has remained consistent (Yourish and Smart, 2023). With the 2024 elections looming, there seems little indication that the political practices of the Trump era will be going away anytime soon.

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<sup>12</sup> Number of charges as of August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

## **Chapter Three**

### **The Conservative Origin**

*I am a conservative. Quite possibly I am on the losing side; often I think so. Yet, out of a curious perversity I had rather lose with Socrates, let us say, than win with Lenin.*

–Russel Kirk

As mentioned in Chapter One, there is an absence of anthropological literature on conservatism within the United States. The origin of conservative is frequently traced back to the writing of Edmund Burke and the French Revolution (see Burke 1790). Although Burke’s writings would serve as the foundation for later conservative thinkers, conservatism did not rise to prominence in the United States until the 1950s and 1960s. This revitalization of political thought is credited to the writings of Russel Kirk and William Buckley Jr.

As thought expanded and was absorbed by the Republican Party, it built a platform upon which leaders like Reagan and Trump were able to reshape and redefine the term. While it is not my intention to provide overwhelming critical analysis of conservative theory, a brief understanding of the history of conservatism within the United States is necessary if we are to understand why my interlocutors found themselves ousted from the Republican Party. As will be made clear, it was ultimately the inability to match their internalized perception of conservatism with that of Trumpism that led to my interlocutors’ departures from the party. While this chapter briefly discusses some of the core intellectual literature concerning conservatism, my primary goal is to highlight the prominent figures involved in the rise of American conservatism. Taking this into account, I discuss the formation of conservatism as an imagined political community

composed of three main tenants: the fiscal conservative, the social conservative, and the libertarian. In doing so, I aim to provide context for later discussions surrounding my interlocutors' departures from the Republican Party.

**The Rise of American Conservatism: William Buckley Jr. and *National Review***

*Unlike Vienna, it seems altogether possible that did National Review not exist, no one would have invented it. The launching of a conservative weekly journal of opinion in a country widely assumed to be a bastion of conservatism at first glance looks like a work of supererogation, rather like publishing a royalist weekly within the walls of Buckingham Palace. It is not that, of course; if National Review is superfluous, it is so for very different reasons: It stands athwart history, yelling Stop, at a time when no one is inclined to do so, or to have much patience with those who so urge it.*

–William Buckley Jr., *National Review*

While Ronald Reagan is thought to be one of the most influential political figures in transforming conservatism at a structural level via the Republican party, it was William Buckley Jr. that made conservatism widely available to the American public. In 1955 a young William Buckley Jr. published the first issue of *National Review*, a magazine that would later be known as the bible of American conservatism. During its infancy, the *Nation Review* regularly saw contributions from prominent intellectual thinkers, ex-communists, and libertarians. However, none were as important to American conservatism and the post-Eisenhower Republican Party as Russel Kirk. Historian, political theorist, and social critic, Kirk is arguably the father of conservative philosophy in the United States. Inspired by Edmund Burke's writings, Kirk's first book *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (1953/2019) outlined what he identified as the

six canons of conservatism. Primarily, the importance of tradition, moral guidance and governance, and the need to move away from collectivism. As chief proponent of traditionalist conservatism, Kirk's writings helped shape the post-war conservative movement in the United States, a movement that would ultimately morph into the Trump age conservatism that has since ousted my interlocutors from the Republican Party.

As someone inspired by the traditionalist conservatism of Kirk, Buckley (1955) stated that the mission of *National Review* was to, “[Stand] athwart history, yelling Stop, at a time when no one is inclined to do so, or to have much patience with those who so urge it.” However, *National Review* was more than a call to halt the advancement of progress. The seven convictions of *National Review* advocated for the restriction of centralized government's role in protecting its citizens lives, liberties, and properties. As Buckley (1955) stated, “In this great social conflict of the era, we are, without reservations, on the libertarian side.” The rejection of what would later be called “big government” by Buckley cemented the libertarian pillar of American conservatism paving the way for Reaganomics and conservative endorsement of free market capitalism.

However, it was not big government that Buckley and *National Review* rejected. Buckley (1955) denounced what he saw as attempts by intellectuals to project “their modish fads and fallacies” upon the rest of the American public. Witnessing the changes society was facing, Buckley and his fellow contributors published articles that emphasized the importance of prescription, custom, tradition, and the need to resist sudden or rapid change. The notion of prescription as a tenet of conservative thought was first raised by Edmund Burke. Writing in response to the sudden changes he saw coming

from the French Revolution, Burke argued that society is the natural product of slow historical growth. Burke saw the revolution as a threat to the natural order of things thereby establishing conservatism as a reactionary force that counters the inherent instinct and emotion of man while still appealing to reason. Therefore, prudence, prejudice, experience, and habit are better guides than reason, logic, and abstractions (Burke, 1790). Despite having good intentions, man is flawed and efforts to remedy pre-existing evils will usually result in even greater loss. Thus, it is better to maintain what is familiar than to seek the unattainable (Burke, 1790; Huntington, 1957). When Kirk (1953/2019) published *The Conservative Mind*, he reiterated Burke's argument that "prescription, is the most solid of all titles...." (Burke, N.D. cited by Canavan, 1973, pg. 454) and that change must occur gradually in order to build upon the wisdom of previous generations. As Kirk outlined, innovation must be tied to existing traditions and customs, which requires a respect for the political value of prudence in the face of change (Kirk, 1953/2019, pg. 8-9). Through the mission statement of *National Review*, Buckley sought to embody Kirk's warning against sudden or rapid change helping to draw in groups of traditionalists disturbed by changes to the status quo. In doing so, the traditionalism of Kirk became one of the first core tenets of American conservatism.

In addition to traditionalists disturbed by social changes, *National Review* attracted anti-communists by denouncing collectivism. As Buckley stated in the mission statement of *National Review*,

The century's most blatant force of satanic utopianism is communism. We consider "coexistence" with communism neither desirable nor possible, nor

honorable; we find ourselves irrevocably at war with communism and shall oppose any substitute for victory (Buckley, 1955).

Writing in the 1950s and 60s Kirk and Buckley's message aligned with the anti-communist sentiment that was sweeping across the United States. As with prescription and tradition, the anti-collectivist rhetoric of American conservatism can be traced back to the writings of Burke. Burke argued that apart from the moral sense, men are and should remain unequal because civil society requires hierarchy, and leadership. Kirk later adopted this argument by stressing the need for society to possess orders and classes that emphasize the "natural" distinctions of conditions whilst still recognizing equality in judgment before God and courts of law (Kirk, 1953/2019, pg. 8-9). Like his fellow conservatives, Kirk denounced collectivism and upheld that economic leveling is not progress but merely a threat to freedom. However, in contrast to Tocqueville (1835) and the language my interlocutors see coming from 21<sup>st</sup> century conservatism, Burke and Kirk rejected the argument that individualism was necessary to protect the rights and freedoms of the individual.

In his second book *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Conservatism*<sup>13</sup>, Kirk explicitly identified the dire need for true community within modern society. However, in line with the anti-communist/anti-collectivist sentiment of *National Review*, Kirk argued that true community is far removed from collectivism. Community, Kirk argued, is required for democracy and true community must be voluntary. It cannot be forced upon an individual by a governing agency. Kirk did not believe the conservative to be selfish.

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<sup>13</sup> Retitled *Russell Kirk's Concise Guide to Conservatism* in 2019.

Rather he believed them to be public-spirited with the knowledge that collectivism means the end of real community and society. This minimalist approach to governing would later prove pivotal in helping to legitimize the Republican Party's approach to governing, particularly during the Reagan era.

While Kirk revitalized the writings of Burke, it was through Frank Meyer that the boundaries of conservatism were able to expand beyond the traditionalism of Kirk. Meyer, a philosopher and activist, is responsible for the introduction of "fusionism," a philosophy that merged elements of libertarianism with traditionalist conservatism (see Meyer, 1962). Through Meyer and fusionism, the writings of Friedrich Hayek would end up an unlikely contributor to American conservatism. A prominent supporter of classical liberalism, Hayek argued that central planning and government control of economic decision making would inevitably lead to tyranny and the loss of individual freedoms (Hayek, 1944/2006). The influence of Hayek's economic theories was such that they later proved to be a source of inspiration for both Goldwater and Reagan, the latter of whom helped to popularize Hayek's belief that government intervention poised a fundamental threat to freedom. While Hayek remained highly critical of conservatism (see Hayek, 1992), he shared in its critique of collectivism. It was this aspect that Meyer found particularly appealing and proved to be instrumental in the success of Meyer's fusionism. After reading Hayek's (1944/2006) book the *Road to Serfdom* Meyer rejected his communist beliefs and joined Buckley one of the founding senior editors for *National Review*. Using his position, Meyer was able to synthesize the traditionalist and libertarian strains of conservative thought. Fusionism reached its height during the



presidency of Ronald Reagan when the libertarian arm of the Republican Party presented large government as the enemy of the people, promoting individual liberty, and the insistence that personal freedom is inseparable from economic freedom.

Fusionism allowed Meyer and Buckley to expand the boundaries of conservatism by drawing in new groups of supporters. They united traditionalists, libertarians, and other political groups under a single banner creating a new conservative movement that appealed to the broader American public (Bridges and Coyne, 2007). In doing so they were able to help Reagan get elected and rebrand the umbrella term neoliberalism as a core pillar of American conservatism. Meyer's contributions to *National Review* spoke directly to the libertarian by proclaiming that the American conservative believes the role of centralized government to be limited to protecting its citizens' lives, liberty, and property. As Meyer stated: "truth withers when freedom dies, however righteous the authority that kills it; and free individualism uninformed by moral value rots at its core and soon brings about conditions that pave the way for surrender to tyranny" (1962, pg. 9). Meyer emphasised the importance of federalism or residual state sovereignty that has been embraced by prominent Republican figures, citing them as necessary to protect against infringement upon the rights of citizens, diminishing individual freedom, and hampering progress. In doing so, he bridged the gap between libertarian thinking and traditionalist conservatism, creating a home for a new group of conservatives within the Republican Party. As Ribuffo (2011) notes, the lasting impact of Meyer would ensure that the traditions of American conservatism fought to conserve what most of the world called liberalism.

While Meyer and Buckley were working to expand the boundaries of American conservatism through *National Review*, they also used the magazine to exclude people or ideas or groups they considered unworthy of the conservative title. Buckley founded *National Review* with the goal of making conservatism respectable again. For this reason, he and others worked to hold back the fringe groups that threatened to change the fundamental ideas upon which *National Review* was founded. This included Buckley's decision to denounce Robert W. Welch Jr. and the John Birch Society, citing them as being "far removed from common sense." Founded in 1958, the John Birch Society promoted ultraright social conservative ideas whose influence is felt in the everyday language of the Trump led Republican Party (Heer, 2016). Throughout the early 1960s Buckley and *National Review* pushed for the John Birch Society to be exiled from American conservatism, refusing to publish any of their material. While Buckley and *National Review* were cited for their reinforcement of racism, Buckley took efforts to denounce antisemitism and other rhetoric as outside the scope of conservatism and the mission of *National Review*. As such, the early years of *National Review* and by proxy conservatism were defining the need to uphold the bonds of civility and reason. As shall be subject to discussion later on, the breakdown of civility and order within the Republican Party remains one of the primary reasons for my interlocutors' departures from Trump and the Republican Party.

Further, *National Review* took great care in choosing who to endorse, only choosing political candidates whom they felt embodied the spirit of conservatism. In the 1960s, *National Review* helped to promote presidential candidate Barry Goldwater's

campaign by spreading his message across the United States. As stated earlier, although Goldwater lost the election, his bid for presidency marked the end of liberal Republicanism. Four years later *National Review* endorsed Richard Nixon but stopped short of endorsing him in 1972 for his failure to live up to their standards. When Ronald Reagan ran for office in 1976, 1980, and 1984 *National Review* once again stepped forward to provide support for Reagan's initiatives. As tensions with the Soviet Union peaked, *National Review* continued to rely on its anti-collectivist rhetoric and presented the communist as a common enemy of the American people (Thrift, 2014). This not only helped bolster support for conservatism as the champion of American individualism and the American way of life, but also further aligned the more libertarian minded individual with mainstream conservatism in the United States.

### ***The Rise of Social Conservatism***

While the early years of *National Review* successfully held back fringe groups, by the time Reagan left office in the 1980s, conservatism in the United States had evolved beyond the ideas originally set out by Buckley. As the Republican Party sought to expand its voter base, so too did conservatism expand beyond its traditionalist roots. With television and radio providing the necessary platforms for old and newly emerging fringe groups to spread their message, many were able to gain political footholds and firmly establish themselves as part of the conservative movement in the United States.

Ultimately this would culminate in the establishment of the social conservative tenant of the Republican Party. Many of these movements were formed from the traumas of peoples disturbed by the social changes they saw as a threat to religious traditions. It

came from parents who learned that their children were being taught about homosexual in school. More than anything, it came from the outrage people felt at the legalization of abortion (Nash, 2006). With organizations like the Christian Coalition (1989) or the Moral Majority (1979-1989) leading the religious right at a political level, American conservatism saw a rising moral intensity that it had not seen since the likes of Barry Goldwater in 1964 (Nash, 2006).

As religious ideology began to merge with traditionalist conservative thought, they created what Mason (2018) identified as a sort of “mega identity.” Specifically, the notion that political identities have merged with other identity groups including racial, social, and religious. As the 1960s saw the merging of these groups (McGirr, 2001) the United States saw an end to an era of liberal hegemony as it was overtaken by a rising conservative thought (Hodgson, 2004). One of the key players in this social conservative take-over was Phyllis Schlafly. Schlafly was a conservative activist, attorney, and spokesperson for the National Conservative Movement. She has been called the “Boadicea of social conservatism” due to her role in revitalizing the American Right during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hall, 2011). A staunch supporter of Barry Goldwater, Schlafly led several political campaigns and grassroots movements including STOP ERA<sup>14</sup> which successfully prevented the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1972. In her monthly *Phyllis Schlafly Report*, Schlafly sought to emphasize the Christian principle that she argued the United States was founded upon.

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<sup>14</sup> The name STOP ERA is based on the acronym Stop Taking Our Privileges (STOP) and Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).

Writing in 1976, three years after Roe V. Wade's passage, she claimed that pornography, abortion, and homosexuality were all issues that threatened to destroy the Republic, "As we take our Bicentennial moral inventory, we should heed the advice of the great French commentator, Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote in the last century: 'America is great because America is good. And if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great'" (Schlafly, 1976). Appealing to the morality of conservatives Schlafly engaged in the same type of rhetoric that would ultimately prove successful in uniting voters around issues that had until that point remained separate from liberal and conservative political thought. The inclusion of the Religious Right into American conservatism helped mobilize voters and led many to unite over more than just economic policies. For these individuals, conservatism had transcended beyond political thought, it was now about fundamental issues of morality.

While one might think this linkage of religious thought would be far removed political ideology considering the language of the United States Constitution and the famous "separation of Church and State," American conservatism is deeply rooted in religious tradition. One of the key points that Kirk included within his six "canons of conservative thought" was that "political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems" (Kirk, 1953/2019, pg. 8). However, in contrast to the social conservatism that arose out of the 1960s, Kirk's need for religious morals as a source of moral guidance did not stress that they need be Christian in nature. In contrast, individuals like-Schlafly combined the moral codes laid down in biblical scripture with documents such as the Declaration of Independence. In doing so they made Christian issues American issues,

thus helping to break down the walls separating Church and State. With the passage of Roe V. Wade in 1973, the Religious Right was able to further mobilize against issues such as abortion, LGBTQ2S+ rights, social justice, and racial inequality. The inclusion of these issues into societal notions of conservatism in the United States has allowed many self-proclaimed social conservatives to align themselves emotionally and politically with both libertarians and fiscal conservative groups.

As the 2001 election of social conservative President George W. Bush highlighted, the use of religious doctrine to pass influential social policies such as the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act helped bolster support amongst conservative voters (Ashbee, 2007). As polling continues to demonstrate, these issues continue to generate some of the strongest support from voters (Abramowitz, 2018) and routinely mobilize the fundamentalist and religious right against the socially liberal platforms of the Democratic Party (Brinkley, 1994). From George W. Bush onward, social conservatism dominated the rhetoric of the Republican Party, replacing the traditions of Kirk and Buckley. With the fall of Roe V Wade in 2022, the country saw increasingly bold conservative legislation that further restricted access to reproductive healthcare. Further emboldened by this victory, conservative leaders across the country have begun to introduce legislation that restricts access to gender affirming care. While this has helped to further energize members of the religious right, it continues to alienate those drawn to the ideals of early conservative thinkers.

***Conservatism: An Imagined Community***

*I don't want to put titles on them because by putting a label on something you really fuck everything up.*

– Anonymous

Up until Trump, the power of the Republican Party and the two-party system kept the otherwise hesitant conservatives united. Despite the shift in mainstream conservatism over the years, millions of Americans routinely find themselves united by imaginary bonds of social and political solidarity as they are drawn into the political socio-drama that is the election cycle. The sheer subjectiveness of the term conservative allows for individuals to maintain some personalized perception of conservatism while still matching that constructed imaginary to the larger conservative identity group. Out of each of the previously discussed movement, writer, or thinker came a new branch of conservatism that together form the community we know of as American conservatism. Held together by the hegemony of the Republican Party, these seemingly unrelated ideas form a political community, albeit one with a subjective political identity. As such, conservatism in the United States has become akin to an imagined community capable of uniting members through bonds of political solidarity against a real or imagined foe. The term imagined community is borrowed from Benedict Anderson's (1983) description of the modern nation and his efforts to analyze nationalism. Anderson believed the nation to be a strictly modern phenomenon whose membership is a socially constructed political community, imagined by individuals who believe themselves to be part of a group. He further argued that the sheer size of the modern nation prevents members from forming

any “real” bonds of membership. He concludes that for this reason the modern nation cannot be anything other than imaginary.

Central to Anderson’s argument was the role of print capitalism and media, both of which he argued allowed for the formation of imagined communities. Likewise, the rise of American conservatism can be largely attributed to the spread of information through sources like *National Review*. In much the same fashion, the expansion of conservatism to include elements brought forth by the Religious Right etc. owes much of its existence to the ease in which individuals were able access increasingly partisan news platforms and social media. As noted, many of these platforms allowed ideas previously held at bay by Buckley to permeate throughout American conservatism.

With spokespersons like Rush Limbaugh and Fox News dominating the airwaves, political dialogue left open a pathway for the rise of Trumpism. The impact of this partisan language was further amplified by the overabundance of information generated by the type of 24-hour news cycle that began to dominate the world of cable news. This process fostered an environment in which individuals were able to selectively choose content that reaffirmed their own political beliefs (Prior, 2007) while excluding those they find contrary. As Jamieson and Cappella (2008) point out, unlike mainstream news which favours balance and objectivity, partisan media outlets explicitly endorse one side and criticize the other. Partisanship and partisan media, primes and activates viewers’ partisan group strengthening one’s feelings towards a particular in-group (Levendusky, 2013). This in turn mobilizes members within the same "national imagined community" while simultaneously reinforcing the presence of the political “other” (Husting, 1999;



Anderson, 1983). It is not enough for one side to be right; the other side must be utterly and completely wrong.

The long-term effect of this is the creation of cohesive ingroup groups and political identities whose existence required both the inclusion of members, as well as the exclusion of others (see Erikson, 1966). In the context of a rigid two-party system such as that which dominates the United States, conservatives cannot exist without their political opposite. Just as the conservative is defined by a set of values, so too are they defined by the ideals that distinguish them from the other. As was emphasised during conversations with my interlocutors, the desire to defend their conservative self against Trumpism stemmed not only from their internalized definition of conservative thought, but also their desire to distance themselves from the liberal Democrats. Finally, in addition to reaffirming one's membership to a particular group, these partisan sources provide the appropriate staging ground for the creation of increasingly isolated political communities. This political isolation would prove to be a contributing factor in their early support of Donald Trump. Once exposed, it becomes impossible to reconcile their own image of conservatism as compatible with that of the Republican Party.

Finally, Anderson argued that members hold in their minds a mental image of their affinity for the modern nation, thereby forming the bonds necessary for the survival of the community. Within the United States, this degree of affinity is strengthened every four years when members of each political community answer a call to action to vote for their chosen representative. In doing so, they renew their membership to each political group through the same ritualized behaviours that Kertzer (1988) outlined in his

discussion of the American presidential cycle. However, for this to occur there must be a totem or symbol capable of binding members together. In the case of conservatism, a theory that at its core resists change, there must exist a set of traditions, values, and ideas that one can fight to conserve. Within the United States, these components are found written into the Constitution. The Constitution of the United States remains one of the most powerful political totems, that provides the emotional investments required to bind together a political community, be that community real or imagined. Max Lerner, whose writings were inspired by the works of Emil Durkheim, referenced the importance of the United States Constitution as a tribal totem necessary for membership within the United States. As Lerner states,

Every tribe needs its totem and its fetish, and the Constitution is ours. Every tribe clings to something which it believes to possess supernatural powers, as an instrument for controlling unknown forces in a hostile universe. This is true of civilized nations as well. Men need always something on which to fix their emotions, whether positively in the form of adoration or deification, or negatively in the form of a taboo. Like every people, the American people have wanted some anchorage, some link with the invariant (1941/2020, pg. 236).

The Constitution has inscribed within it the necessary traditions and customs to reflect the conservative imaginary of the individual. Echoing Kirk's argument for prescription, the traditions enshrined in the Constitution have since established itself as a core tenant of American conservatism.

Further emphasizing the importance of the Constitution within American conservative thought is its incorporation into the Sharon Statement. The Sharon Statement was drafted by M. Stanton Evans and adopted in 1960 during a conference that took place

in William Buckley Jr.'s hometown of Sharon, Connecticut (Klatch, 1999). The conference was organized by a group of some 90 young conservatives that would later found the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF). The YAF played a critical role in developing many of the previously mentioned organizations of the 1960s and 70s by engaging young conservatives across the United States. Seeking to embody the mission of *National Review*, Evans wrote, "That the Constitution of the United States is the best arrangement yet devised for empowering government to fulfill its proper role, while restraining it from the concentration and abuse of power" and "That the genius of the Constitution - the division of powers - is summed up in the clause that reserves primacy to the several states, or to the people in those spheres not specifically delegated to the Federal government" (Young America's Foundation, 1960). While the Constitution provided groups like the YAF with a set of traditions, one of the things that makes the Constitution so powerful particularly in the Sharon Statement is its inherent flexibility.

The language of the Constitution is ever changing and open to interpretation (see Crapanzano, 2000). It allows for individuals to feel they can apply its language faithfully while simultaneously adopting it to fit within the confines of their own individualized political imaginary. While the importance of the Constitution is by no means exclusive to the American conservative tradition, the need and desire to resist straying too far from the guiding principles enshrined within the Constitution of the United States remains a prominent feature of modern conservative thought.

For my interlocutors, the language of the Constitution serves as anchor for the political self, as well as justification for their eventual departure from Trump and the

Republican Party. As one of my interlocutors told me following the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> 2021, “The Constitution for me represents protections against mobs of people all deciding that they're going to believe one way enforcing the rest of us to and to me that's paramount... Trump and his followers are none of that they don't care about any of it.” As my interlocutors' personal accounts shall highlight, the Constitution represents protection and stability while Trumpism is seen as being at the root of the turbulent and shifting political climate.

When one considers that both Buckley and Kirk spoke out against pursuing rapid or sudden changes that might otherwise hinder social progress, those who subscribe to this belief see enshrined within the Constitution the language necessary to protect against such changes. However, as conversations with my interlocutors would outline, Trumpism represented a sharp break in these traditions. Trump and those following him presented a path contrary to my interlocutors' desire to preserve the traditions outlined in documents such as the Constitution. He led the Republican Party in such a way that their actions contradicted the very traditions the conservative seeks to protect in their fight to preserve the Constitution. As such, any acts or actions that directly or indirectly went against my interlocutors' interpretation of the Constitution were taken as an attack on conservatism itself.

Together with totems such as the Constitution, American conservatism continues to be defined by the three tenants of conservatism, each of which draws influence from many of the previously mentioned thinkers. These three being the libertarian, the fiscal conservative, and the social conservative. Each of these pillars provides a home for each

group expanding beyond the ideas of individuals like Russel Kirk and William Buckley Jr. As of now, conservatism in the United States remains as much a religious and moral philosophy as it is a political one. When combined, the values and ideas ingrained within these three pillars provide the necessary means for members to form both a political identity and the imagined community known as American conservatism.

The first of these categories owes its existence to Hayek and Meyer. Out of Meyer's fusionism came a version of conservatism that valued individual liberty and state federalism over the need for "true community" (Kirk, 2019). While this began as a way to include libertarian leaning individuals turned off by the notion of strong government involvement, it has since evolved into a movement embraced by far-right groups including the Tea Party and Oath Keepers. However, many of these movements starkly contrast the opinions of Kirk who has spoken out against libertarian ideology. As Kirk explained,

In any society, order is the first need of all. Liberty and justice may be established only after order is tolerably secure. But the libertarians give primacy to an abstract liberty. Conservatives, knowing that "liberty inheres in some sensible object," are aware that true freedom can be found only within the framework of a social order, such as the constitutional order of these United States. In exalting an absolute and indefinable "liberty" at the expense of order, the libertarians imperil the very freedoms they praise (Kirk, 1988).

As Kirk's words suggested, the clash between libertarian ideology and conservative traditionalism would prove a dividing issue during the Trump era. Although the United States has a long history of resisting government (Grossberg, 2018), the labelling of large government as the enemy of the people has contributed to the establishment of a

defensive reactionary mindset that Trump was able to feed on early on in his bid for presidency. Speaking with a 35-year-old man from Texas, whom I have given the name Walter, explained to me the responses he gets from his friends when he attempts to discuss certain political issues.

I've tried to talk to [them] and every time all I get is this kinda mentality, I guess that is rights and freedoms are difficult to attain and very easy to lose. My friends... well I am not sure if I should call them friends at this point. It's almost like they feel they are under attack, and I feel like it's gotten worse since Trump. I mean look at this ridiculousness with masking. It's freedom, this freedom that well [voice trails off] ...

Statements such as these would become commonplace throughout my fieldwork as my interlocutors saw amongst their former political groups behaviours that they felt went against common decency and the common good.

As major events like Covid-19, BLM protests, and January 6<sup>th</sup> highlighted, the libertarian anti-establishment sect of American conservatism threatened the very rights and freedoms conservatism was meant to protect. Faced with this prospect and the threat it carried, many of my interlocutors found themselves questioning the role of government and how this new role fit within their understanding of American conservatism. In particular, the role the government should have in enforcing the rights guaranteed under the Constitution. Each of my interlocutors stressed to me that these rights be applied universally and without prejudice. However, having witnessed the selectiveness upon which these rights were applied under Trump most found themselves deeply disturbed by the level of hypocrisy they saw coming from the Republican Party under Donald Trump. As further chapters will continue to highlight, this hypocrisy, coupled with an over

extension of individualist ideology would be central to their departure from the Republican Party.

Much like the libertarian branch of American conservatism, the origin of the economic or fiscal branch can be traced back to the classical liberalism that developed in Europe and the United States during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hudelson, 1999). The term fiscal conservatism traces much of its roots back to the 1930s and the American New Deal. However, it took until the 1950s to be formally associated with American conservative thought (Coates, 2012). This school of economic thought in the United States drew inspiration from the likes of Adam Smith (Smith, 1776/2014; Hudelson, 1999) and European *laissez-faire*. However, contrary to its European counterpart, *laissez-faire* in the United States did not equate to zero government intervention. As Donohue notes, “On the contrary, [Americans] were more than willing to see government provide tariffs, railroad subsidies, and internal improvements, all of which benefited producers. What they condemned was intervention on behalf of consumers” (2003, pg. 2). Out of this manner of thinking emerged the neoliberal economic policies of Ronald Reagan. Reagan popularized the notion of limited government and helped fiscal conservatism as a cornerstone of the Republican Party. Unlike the liberalism of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, classical liberalism i.e., neoliberalism opposed government authority, preferring individualism over collectivism, while viewing free market capitalism as the preferred means to achieving economic goals (Dickerson et al., 2010). As noted, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century these ideas had become a core tenant of American conservative and as such the tradition of an open market or free enterprise economy is what most often comes to mind

when discussing American political culture (Hartz, 1955; Schildkraut, 2013). As previously identified, one of the most prominent examples of this is Reagan's economic policies. Reagan's legacy ensured that American conservatism has in part committed itself to conserving at least a central pillar of liberalism.

Despite its underlying contradictions, the economic and fiscal aspect of American conservatism was key in establishing part of my interlocutors' understanding of American conservatism. Speaking with at least a dozen self-identifying fiscal conservatives, two themes stood out. The first stressed a prudent approach to economics and spending. This in part echoed the anti-collectivist mentality that Buckley and Meyer sought to capture in the early days of *National Review*. As one of my interlocutors stated, "Fiscal conservative is [only] partly about spending. It's not being profligate with spending being a little bit judicious and understanding that the government can't do everything for all people at all times [sic]." While each recognized the need for certain support structures, my interlocutors, like Hayek, voiced a desire to move away from the welfare state. For many of my interlocutors, their understanding of conservatism was founded upon embracing a free economy and the opportunities they felt American capitalism presented the individual with. The second component expanded upon this notion of economic freedom expanding it to include the rules and regulations imposed upon them by governing bodies. Often citing federal regulations and over imposing bureaucracy, many of these self-proclaimed fiscal conservatives saw government economic intrusion as the root of most problems. As I shall discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, the desire to escape the suffocating confines imposed by the federal government formed the basis of my



interlocutors' conservative identity. However, as with social support, my interlocutors did not project the desire to remove all federal involvement, rather there was an underlying desire to keep government involvement in the private sector to a minimum. Further, in contrast to the libertarian sect of conservatism, the fiscal conservative has been left abandoned as these issues now appear absent from conservative thought. Finally, unlike social conservative issues, the values associated with fiscal conservatism were often far more flexible and seemingly open to discussion particularly when presented with an all or nothing approach such as that presented by Trump as leader of the Republican Party.

The final tenant stems from the efforts of individuals like Schlafly and the Religious Right. Through their work, religious themes have entrenched themselves within the conservative tradition under the broad title of social conservatism. Schlafly and others like her helped to create a home for the religious right within the Republican Party. Linking moral and religious issues under social conservatism, many American voters often find themselves prioritizing certain social issues over fiscal ones (Mcveigh and Estep, 2019). This can even be the case when the fiscal policies commonly taken by the Republican Party under the guise of conservatism negatively impact the economic livelihood of those who support them (see also Frank, 2004).

Highlighting this is Sarah, a 39-year-old Black woman living in New Orleans Louisiana whom I interviewed in October of 2020. Sarah is a former member of a

religious movement called shepherding and discipleship<sup>15</sup>. She remembers being told by members of her spiritual community to vote against what she called socially “liberal” issues even if this meant voting for policies that negatively impacted her. As she explained,

Basically, it was the pastor that was supporting President Trump. Especially after he got elected, they screw and twist scriptures. Like, honour of those in authority and they make it to where it's more than just honouring someone. Don't question me because God placed me in authority [sic]. So even though I had doubts it was like, well, this person is more spiritually mature than me. You know? They hear from God, more than me. So, I'm just going to trust them because I'm a very spiritual person.

This not only included economic policies but also social policies arising from her status as a person of colour in the United States. As a victim of what she called “spiritual abuse,” Sarah acknowledged how in the past she had been coerced into voting in such a way that reinforced the systemic racism she faces on a day-to-day basis. She explained

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<sup>15</sup>On the topic of discipleship and shepherding as told to me by Sarah: So, in discipleship and shepherding, what happens is, it goes beyond that, [it's] where they kind of take part in your life. Like if you want to make a decision, [you get] advice from them. Like let's say you want to buy a car; you're kind of advised that you should talk to someone who is spiritually more mature than you, because this person, you know, can hear from God better than you. And now this is stuff that's kind of instilled over time. It doesn't just happen like that where you basically you know, come to the person for everything, you know. Even as far as dating, you know, you're supposed to talk to them, you know, before you decide to date someone, you know. If you want to marry someone. If they don't feel comfortable with it, you know, they'll kind of give you hints, like, “Oh, well I don't feel at peace with this.” “I don't think this is God's will for you in life.” So basically, this is how it happens, where this leader becomes the voice of God in your life.

that her former religious institution imposed upon her the image of the Republican Party as morally and religiously righteous and that she had been blind to the contradictions they created. Sarah was one of several interlocutors who highlighted the capability of religious structures to overwhelm one's social and political imaginary.

The rise of social conservatism within the Republican Party has linked the religious with the political. By generating rhetoric that speaks to the moral and religious values of the individual, the Republican Party has fostered a political environment in which one is able to commit to conservatism via the religious and social values without committing to other fiscal or economic conservative platforms (Abramowitz, 2018). While this has provided a home within the Republican Party for members of the Religious Right, social conservatism has left homeless the conservative drawn in by the likes of Buckley and Kirk. It has left the fiscal conservative, the traditionalist, and the moderate without a party. As conversations with my interlocutors emphasised, what many are seeing is a near total neglect of the values they associate with conservatism prompting a departure from the party. Further, the intervention of government on issues pertaining to marriage and abortion are seen by many as an attack on the basic principles of American conservatism which relies on limited government involvement.

Speaking on the issue of social conservatism and lack of fiscal concerns with the Republican Party, one of my interlocutors was reminded of a statement made by Rush Limbaugh in July of 2019. When asked by a caller how the Republican Party can justify nominating Trump for a second term despite his lack of fiscal conservative values, Limbaugh stated that, "Nobody is a fiscal conservative anymore. All this talk about

concern for the deficit and the budget has been bogus for as long as it's been around.”

When Meyer introduced the writings of Hayek via fusionism, he attracted the attention of individuals concerned about economic and fiscal issues. However, as discussions with my interlocutors would further highlight, in contrast to the fiscal issues which my interlocutors found to be lacking within the Republican Party, the socially conservative issues had become an area of hyper-focus thereby restricting the rights and freedoms of others. This proved particularly problematic for several interlocutors and was a fundamental part of their shift away from Trump and the Republican Party.

Together, each of these sub-groups combined form the imagined political community that we know of as American conservatism. While the term itself remains strictly subjective, whatever understanding we have of conservatism as a political identity label has bound itself to the Republican Party. As such, any actions taken by the Republican Party and its elected officials serve to represent the nature of American conservatism. For those who believed themselves to be members of the conservative community in 2016 the choice to vote for Trump meant adhering to the familiar behaviours they had grown accustomed to. Without space to align with a third party and without the political structures in place to keep Trump in check, many felt that he still best embodied their own conservative imaginary. Trump's presidency ultimately helped to spotlight outstanding issues ranging from rising extremism, lack of fiscal responsibility, and an increased focus on social issues often at the expense of others. As such, it begs the question what it meant to call oneself conservative among my interlocutors.

As the rest of this dissertation will highlight, conservatism as defined by my interlocutors no longer exists. This does not mean that my interlocutors have abandoned their conservative identity. Rather I found it to be quite the contrary. Most explicitly stated that they still identify as conservative. However, their ability to label themselves as such is limited by the powers that govern the political structures within the United States. If nothing else, these individuals now exist within a state of limbo. They are conservative because they believe themselves to be. However, they are rejected by members of a political party claiming to uphold conservative values. As future chapters will highlight, the image of conservatism that my interlocutors uphold falls outside the image being projected by the Republican Party, thereby forcing a shift in political identity and party membership.

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Former Trump Voter**

*I was embarrassed. I remember thinking this is not normal. I can't believe I voted for this guy. I just I just [sic] well I just did not know what I know now.*

– Anonymous

After Trump won the 2016 Republican primary election, the decision to support him was in many ways a choiceless one (see Aretxaga, 1997). Caught within the trappings of a binary political system, Trump's empty campaign promises, rhetoric, and political ideology all merged with the historical traditions of the Republican Party. This included the fiscal, social, and religious platforms that have drawn reliable voter groups towards the Republican Party and/or, away from the Democratic Party. Thus, millions of Americans found themselves voting for Trump and the Republican Party in the 2016 election. While many based this decision on their affinity for Trump and the desire to see a new type of leadership, others did so reluctantly either out of loyalty (see Hirschman, 1970) to the Republican Party or because of the disdain they felt towards Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. However, as time progressed many found that Trump was in direct contradiction to the values and ideas that made up their conservative selves.

Speaking over Zoom with these former Trump voters, I found each to have their own unique story and reason for departing from Trump and the Republican Party. While instances of exceptional violence such as Covid-19 and January 6<sup>th</sup> were cited by many as specific examples, it was ultimately the ongoing and underlying contradiction between

my interlocutors' conservative imaginary and that projected by Trump which made membership to the Republican Party an impossibility. As previously discussed in Chapter Two and Three, Trump was not the sole cause of these contradictions. Rather, he helped bring attention to the inconsistencies and falsehoods that had been festering within the Republican Party and American conservative movement. For the economic or fiscal conservative, Trump's financial history and the Republican Party's (mis)management of the American economy proved incompatible with their definition of fiscal conservatism. For the libertarian, Trumpism took the concept of limited government to new extremes, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, for the social conservative, the actions of the Republican Party proved too constricting and too contradictory for even some single-issue voters. In short, Trumpism proved to be too far removed from my interlocutors' internalized sense of conservatism, prompting many to re-evaluate where they fit along the political spectrum. Ultimately Trump's failure to live up to their expectation of American conservatism forced upon them the decision to exit the Republican Party.

***Bravo***

One of the first people to contact me was an individual that I have given the name Bravo. Bravo was 57 at the time we first spoke in September of 2020. Born in Windsor Canada, Bravo moved to the United States after he finished university. He currently lives in California with his wife and kids and runs a small company. When I first asked Bravo about his political affiliation, he told me that,

I describe myself as a conservative. [pauses] Well actually maybe the best way to approach the question is to say I'm a Republican but I hate the Republican stance on the 'Big Three.' I hate The Republican stance on Church and State. I hate the Republican stance on anti-abortion. I hate the Republican stance on anti-gay marriage.

As previously noted, the “Big Three” Bravo referred to have dominated conservative Republican political discourse ever since the Bush era. Considering the disdain Bravo felt towards these otherwise hardline issues, I inquired why Bravo felt a connection to the Republican Party and American conservative thought. He explained that until recently, he habitually prioritized the fiscal conservatism of the Republican Party over their stance on the previously mentioned “Big Three.” While he rejects the social conservatism brought on by members of the religious right, he fully embraces the neoliberal thought process that individuals like Meyer brought into conservative thinking.

However, it was not just fiscal conservatism that bound Bravo to the Republican Party. As our conversations progressed, it became apparent that the bonds of membership he shared with the Republican Party stemmed not only from his affinity for the party's ideals, but rather from the alienation fostered by the “liberal” thinking of the Democratic Party. As he explained,

Bravo: I can go down the list of things that I lean Republican as opposed to [Democrat]... [but] I think you can answer two different questions with the same answer. Why do I lean Republican? Why do I lean away from Democrats?



Kyle: Okay. So then would you be able to tell me why you lean away from Democrats?

Bravo: The amount of effort and structure that you had to go through to write what six minutes of introductory qualification for this call<sup>16</sup>. When what you intended in those words...could be explained in two sentences. You're not going to do anything nefarious. That seems to me just a gigantic [waste of time]. And I'm not comparing McMaster University with the American government structure, but in essence they both have that commonality of massive bureaucracy. It's frustrating to me to live in that world of bureaucracy. And when I hear the Democrats speak what I often hear is bureaucracy.

Placed within a binary political system such as that which dominates the United States, Bravo and others like him find themselves trapped between two increasingly distinct parties. Frustrated with the bureaucracy and lack of fiscal responsibility he sees coming from the Democratic Party, Bravo was driven towards the Republican Party despite the disgust he feels towards the social conservative platform. Denied the option to align with a middle- or third-party Bravo feels trapped between two conflicting ideas. On the one hand he supports the neoliberal economic theories embraced by American conservative thinkers. However, he struggles to align this with the socially conservative issues as they contradict the hands-off approach to government that he finds most appealing.

Thinking back to the months leading up to and immediately following the 2016 election, Bravo recalled feeling optimistic and supportive of Donald Trump. He stressed that it was purely blind optimism inspired by the hope that Trump would bring a less

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<sup>16</sup> This statement is in reference to the informed consent document that was read to all individuals prior to the start of the first interview.

academic approach to governing the country. In this context, I understood this term “blind optimism” to reflect a hopefulness backed not by historical fact, but by desire.

Specifically, a desire to escape the trappings of career politicians and government bureaucracy. Bravo explained that he had grown frustrated by the bureaucratic restrictions imposed by the federal government on public and private sectors and frustrated by how this limits creativity and business. Thus, Donald Trump represented the promise of a hands-off approach to governing. Despite his history of bankruptcy, Bravo’s desire to escape the vicious cycle of US bureaucracy created the type of “blind optimism” Bravo cited as justification for voting for Trump. Bravo knew that Trump had a poor record in business. He knew that Trump lacked character. Yet he had convinced himself of an alternative reality in which Trump might bring about desired change.

Unlike several of my interlocutors, Bravo never felt an overwhelmingly strong bond toward either party. He stressed early on that his favorite word in the English language is “balance,” preferring not to see the world in “black and white” but rather shades of grey. He further explained how there is not a single person on Earth that he will always agree or disagree with. Taking on this mindset, Bravo said that he never believed that Trump was always right. Nor does he think Trump is, “always wrong. He is just usually an asshole.” Therefore, when asked whether he was aware of Trump’s many faults, Bravo told me that he was very much aware of the many imperfections of Trump’s character. Bravo recalled “being disgusted by some of the personal side of Donald

Trump, especially The Billy Bush hot mike quote<sup>17</sup>. I remember being disgusted by that... and still willing to be optimistic and open minded about what he could do as president.” Despite his best efforts to look past Trump’s personal flaws, the trust Bravo put in Trump began to slowly erode over the next four years.

Bravo’s support for Trump lasted until a few months into the Covid-19 pandemic. By around April 2020 Bravo had found it impossible to justify defending Trump. As he expressed to me, “I’ve just started looking at Donald Trump differently and realizing some of the game that’s being played, and I’ve just lost complete respect and I believe it to be a mutual loss of respect.” However, it was more than just a loss of respect for Trump’s character that drove Bravo away. As Bravo further explained, “when I find myself on the side of a particular issue or an argument where I’m in opposition or disagree with what Donald Trump says, I find, and I hear so clearly that he’s calling me stupid. And I’m truly tired of being called stupid by the President of the United States.” The language used by Trump relied heavily upon an all or nothing approach. It was the same type of language that had been popularized by conservative far-right media host Rush Limbaugh and later used by politicians such as Newt Gingrich.

As the pandemic progressed, Trump maintained his position on issues like the effectiveness of masks, the seriousness of the pandemic, and the legitimacy of the scientific community. Trump would frequently question the intelligence, qualifications,

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<sup>17</sup> This refers to a 2005 recording in which Trump was heard saying “I’m automatically attracted to beautiful women — I just start kissing them, it’s like a magnet. Just kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything... Grab 'em by the pussy.” (Timm, 2016).

and legitimacy of anyone who disagreed with him. By doing so, Trump resisted any form of compromise as to do so would be to concede the relevance of his opposition's point of view. Therefore, Bravo felt that it was impossible to disagree with Trump without calling to question his intelligence, loyalty, or political membership. He felt it increasingly difficult to voice discontent without being labelled, as Bravo put it, "stupid" or an enemy of the conservative nation that Trump championed himself its leader. Considering that Bravo had already voiced frustration at this type of "with or against" mentality, Trump and the language he used only furthered Bravo's belief that he could not stand behind such a party. Thus, despite his more conservative nature and frustration at increased government regulations and bureaucracy, Bravo found himself voting for Biden during the 2020 election cycle.

Like many others, Bravo's journey away from Trump and the Republican Party was caused by more than just the frustration he felt towards Trump demeanour. As an individual drawn towards the fiscal side of American conservatism and the Republican Party, the lack of fiscal responsibility that Trump and the Republican Party exhibited hindered his ability to balance the appeal of fiscal conservatism with the disgust of social conservatism. The scale had been tilted to the point where Bravo felt he had more in common with a moderate Democratic candidate than he did with Donald Trump. However, Bravo remains a proud self-proclaimed independent. He maintains what he identifies as conservative leaning values and has not fundamentally altered how he sees himself. These include the appeal of a free-market economy and limiting the role of government to protecting the basic rights and freedoms of its citizens.

However, in the presence of Trump and the influence he has exerted on the Republican Party, it has forced Bravo to reconsider how he identifies in the presence of others. To label himself conservative means associating with the party and principles he sought to escape. Yet to call himself a liberal means to align himself with an equally confining political party. Thus, he is left free from the confines of a political party but voiceless. Ultimately, he desires a third option so that he no longer must feel trapped by two political extremes and to be able to exist in shades of grey rather than black and white.

### *Harry*

Harry (age 62) was one of the last individuals to contact me in 2020. When we first met in late October of 2020, Harry was living in a long-term care home in Colorado. Due to the time difference, it was often 10:00 pm EST when we spoke. Harry would be sitting at a makeshift desk with the hospital bed visible in the background. On several occasions we would be interrupted by a nurse coming to check in or bring him medication. During our first meeting, Harry told me that he was born in Ohio to what he called a “Republican conservative” father and a “liberal Democrat” mother. He explained that this politically diverse environment led him to incorporating aspects of both his mother’s and father’s political philosophy as a young child.

As he grew older, he found himself growing frustrated with the thought of having to affiliate with a single political party. Because of this, he chose to remain a registered Independent for much of his youth. However, he soon found out that as an unaffiliated voter, he was ineligible to vote in primary elections. Forced to choose between the two

parties, he decided that the conservative platform of the Republican Party was closer to his political imaginary, citing what he referred to as his “more conservative nature.” Asked what it was that drew him towards the Republican Party, Harry cited the “hard work ethic” that his father instilled upon him which matched with the anti-collectivist and anti-welfare state that individuals like Kirk and Buckley equated with American conservatism. The often-fantasized narrative of the American Dream achievable through hard work and perseverance was something that dictated much of Bravo’s life. It was also the shattering of this illusion coupled with the actions of Donald Trump that forced Bravo to exit the Republican Party. As he explained to me through a detailed account of his life, Harry’s journey away from the Republican party starts not with Trump but rather with a medical accident that occurred approximately 20 years ago.

After his father retired, Harry moved with his family to Colorado. It was here that he attended university and worked several jobs in Geographic Information System (GIS) and site mapping. While he was working on a second degree, he suffered a serious injury during a winter mountaineering snowshoe ascent that left him temporarily disabled. The injury and subsequent medical malpractice during attempts to treat his leg left him with severe PTSD and a second infection that almost cost him his leg. It was during this time that he was put on several ill-advised medications that resulted in a car crash and further injuries. These included a broken neck and traumatic brain injury. Unable to work effectively, Harry was forced into an early retirement. However, motivated by his conservative ideals regarding work ethic, Harry pushed himself towards a full rehabilitation with the goal of being able to return to work full time. After his wife died,

Harry suffered a heart attack and spinal infection put him in a nursing home. After another three years of rehab, he was diagnosed with a brain tumour. Despite being told it would kill him he decided to have surgeons operate and managed to survive the 15-hour surgery. As before, he began to work tirelessly to rehabilitate himself so he can move out of the long-term care home and return to work.<sup>18</sup>

During the 2016, election Harry was still recovering from his many surgeries. At this time, he was on several medications that he said inhibited his ability to think clearly. He remembers thinking that Trump was the lesser of two evils when compared to Hillary Clinton. However, he admitted that he did not feel he had done his diligence when he made the choice to vote for Trump. As he recalled,

I was lying in bed here, and the two election officials came and asked me in my room here. And I agonized right down to that minute and I... to me, not being as we discussed clear minded at the time I was still of a strong conservative persuasion and watched [laughs] Fox News religiously and “The Five” at three o’clock and that had some appeal arbitrarily to vote for Trump because of that, but I didn’t see things I saw later.

Engulfed in his own media prism (see Bail, 2022), Harry found himself surrounded by information that merely strengthened his own confirmation bias. As the 2016 elections showed, Trump thrived on attention from media sources. His ability to capture the attention of his supporters through channels like Fox News were a key part of his victory in 2016. Hindered by painkillers and a biased political narrative, Harry felt blinded in his

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<sup>18</sup> As of 2022 Harry informed me that he had moved out of the care home and was working a job in a part of Colorado.

decision making. As he progressed in his recovery, he stopped taking the painkillers that he found inhibited his thinking.

He later explained that, with a clear head, he began to read and watch other news sources, thereby escaping the media bubble that had till this point only sought to reinforce his political beliefs. As he did, he remembers feeling his disgust for Trump grow:

[W]ith a clear head which I saw things remarkably different...I was amazed, I did not detect in [Trump] the gut level instinct I personally rely on... just looking at him speak now, my opinion of him was changing from what it was at first, because man I can't believe what stupid pig this guy is... He looks unbalanced to me. He doesn't look like a guy I would trust at a gut level on character. The way they present in some part his demeanour, mannerisms, those things that convey really subtle things to you on a personal level, I would not want them in my own home.

In addition to the “gut” feeling regarding Trump’s character, Harry found himself deeply disturbed by the lack of federal oversight particularly regarding those imposed by the Environmental Protection Agency. Speaking to me on the issue, Harry expressed that,

I’m going to start talking like a liberal now. I was angered by all the environmental regulations. He was lifting water fossil fuel emissions undoing Obama’s. mpg limit on cars to cut down on CO2 and I hadn’t formed any opinions on global warming, yet. I was ambivalent out of ignorance, up until then.

As someone who had spent his life working in environmental related fields of study, Trump’s disregard for these issues began to weigh on Harry. Further, this was the first of several instances in which Harry compared his manner of speech and political opinion with those of the “liberals.” Such had become the manner of mainstream conservatism that even small instances of government regulation had for Harry become linked to the liberal political identity. In contrast, even Hayek acknowledged the need for limited



regulations imposed by the government. Although this marked a slight change in how Harry identified politically, it was not until Trump's first impeachment trial that his disgust with the Republican Party reached its breaking point that led to his exit from the party.

On December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019, members of the House of Representatives adopted two articles of impeachment against Donald Trump. Charged with abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. It was the third time in history that a sitting president had been impeached. Two months later February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the Senate voted on whether to convict Trump. Of the 53 Senate Republicans, only 1 voted with the 45 Senate Democrats to convict. As a result, the vote fell short of the two thirds needed to convict a president of impeachment. In the months leading up to the trial, Harry told me that he had concluded that Trump should be impeached based on the evidence being presented. Thus, when the GOP voted to acquit Trump, it left him feeling "pissed off" and "disappointed" with the GOP. It was at this moment that he recalled feeling "horrified" by the idea that he had voted for Trump and other members of the Republican Party.

This proved to be the pivotal moment in which Harry chose to exit the Republican Party. In February 2020, Harry officially "cast aside" his party affiliation and registered as an Independent. Up to that point, Harry had been loyal to the Republican Party for 35 years. For this reason, he remembers it being "A big deal for me, and I felt liberated by that. I feel now I can really in good conscience vote for the best candidate." The freedom that Harry feels he has gained from no longer being bound to a single party or ideology, has not only shifted his ability to vote in good conscience, but also created additional

avenues upon which he feels that he can expand his political awareness. Leading up to the 2020 election, Harry immersed himself in literature and news sources in an effort to educate himself on key issues. As our conversations would further highlight, Harry's departure from the Republican Party presented an opportunity for personal growth and education.

Although Harry changed his party membership well before the election, he did not finalize his decision to vote for Biden until about three months before the election. He explained that he had been holding out hope that an independent candidate would emerge thereby allowing him to escape the confines of the binary political system. However, when this did not happen, he made the choice to help support Biden in his bid for presidency. For Harry this came in the form of a small monetary donation. Asked why he chose to contribute, Harry explained that he "knew it wouldn't help much" but felt it was "symbolic to me as a personal statement." As he went on to explain, had he not contributed even this small sum and Trump had ended up winning, he felt like he would have always been left wondering if he could have done more. The opportunity to contribute to Biden's campaign presented Harry with a viable and tangible method of voicing his support without pledging loyalty to a particular party.

With Harry confined to the nursing home throughout the pandemic, I had the opportunity to spend many evenings speaking with him on topics ranging from his understanding of conservatism and subsequent departure from the Republican Party to his thoughts and opinions on evolving political issues. It was during these gaps between conversations that Harry took it upon himself to research and reflect upon his personal

journey away from the Republican Party. As part of his ongoing efforts to further educate himself, Harry would often contact me after an evening of conversations with updates or articles he had found. While Harry still considers himself conservative, his readings have led him to re-evaluate his stance on certain issues typically attributed to the “liberal” platform of the Democratic Party. As alluded to during discussions surrounding environmental regulations and the role of government, Harry would comment how his comments made him sound like a liberal.

Further, as someone who experienced medical injuries first hand, the topic of health care deeply impacted the way he thought about political ideals and caused them to shift. He recounted to me his thought process prior to his first accident:

I was a successful professional. I had a wife. We had our second new house. We were living high...And I got a little too enamoured of that, wanting to keep all the stuff I'd earned with a good salary. I thought everything was about what a man earns in life, which I know is a classic tenet of conservative...and I didn't think society owed me a damn thing as a young man.

However, after the cost of 20 years of medical bills caused by his first accident, subsequent surgeries, and rehab that left him and his wife bankrupt, he began to wonder if a person should lose everything they worked for because of a medical accident. This would be a slow realization that coincided with his transition away from the Republican Party. As Harry told me, “Early on [in recovery] I refused to believe the situation was unfair. A man earns his way, he loses it, by the same token. So, I just worked my butt off to get better each time.” Reflecting on this frame of mind in the context of the upcoming 2020 election, Harry explained what he now believed, “I don't think that should happen.

You know, in a free society for everything to be built around capitalism right now...I'm actually getting more liberal, particularly in the last three years with my readings."

However, it was not just his readings that led him to this conclusion, it was also the lived experiences and challenges he now faced in returning to the workforce that initiated this change.

As Harry tirelessly fought to return to the workforce, he realized that the current system does not allow for an individual like himself to easily escape the cycle of poverty and violence. As he explained:

[W]hen I returned to working I know I'll need to do it very, very carefully to at first not breach the financial limitation of how much I can earn disabled part-time and still maintain the disability benefits. So that I can afford health care. So that I can afford to [get] housing. [sic] And then, when I do qualify for benefits on a job that I hope to get part time and hopefully returning to my profession big dream, at what point will I be able to afford paying insurance premiums and then, more significantly, the medical expenses out of pocket associated with private insurance. [T]hat'll be a big leap in the income left to accommodate that. If I was making even double in a part time job what my current disability dollar amount per month is, I could not afford either the premiums or the out-of-pocket expenses; the three to five thousand a year before you're even covered, things like that would break me.

As Bravo was forced to consider the impact that his new job would have on his benefits, he described the realization that the system in its current form does not allow for an individual to achieve the American Dream. As he went further stated:

I'm starting to look at the harder numbers to help for my game plan. But the system is not structured right. And I wish it were. Wouldn't it be nice if we did have a more liberal policy-which I think we're seeing under Biden and US

administration. That would facilitate such transition to working again without a destroying you in the process financially [sic]. So that'll be a real interesting thing that I think is. know is a huge part of what [is] swaying me on my fiscal liberalisation.

In contrast to the free market approach of the Republican Party, and the strong anti-collectivist rhetoric of Buckley and *National Review*, Harry's desire to step away from a strictly capitalist framework in the context of the medical system starkly contrasts with what he associates with the conservative framework currently propagated by the Republican Party. It is this desire that Harry refers to as his "fiscal liberalisation."

Feeling increasingly disconnected from the Republican Party, Harry decided to remain an Independent post-election. He feels this allows him to maintain aspects of his more conservative nature i.e., hard work ethic while still learning about the types of social support programs typically associated with "liberal" politics. He remains on the fence about certain social issues such as abortion but admits that he has shifted further left through his readings. He has now moved out of the nursing home and is living in a more liberal area of Colorado citing the desire to have access to the necessary support needed to return to the workforce. He still maintains several views that he considers "conservative" but like many of my interlocutors, he finds himself more and more open to discussing these issues. Like Bravo, Harry finds that he is happy as an Independent and free from the restrictions of labelling himself a member of either party. In this way, both Bravo and Harry serve as prominent examples of individuals seeking to escape the confines of a binary political system. Both provide evidence in support of Abramowitz's (2018) observation that despite displaying seemingly partisan behaviour, most Americans

find they are increasingly unwilling to claim affiliation to either party. For individuals like Bravo and Harry, calling oneself Independent provides a sense of freedom. Freedom from the feeling that one is bound to follow a single political party and, thus, commit to voting blindly on specific issues. In both cases, each remains content occupying the space reserved for the politically displaced.

*Paula*

Paula (66) reached out to me in late September of 2020 after seeing one of my posts in the Facebook group she was a member of. Sitting on the couch in her living room, she explained to me how her decision to exit the Republican Party was primarily a result of her relationship with her children. Paula grew up in a strong Republican family and remained a lifelong Republican until Trump took office in 2016. Similar to Harry, Paula attributes her choice to vote for Trump in 2016 to a lack of political involvement. As she told me during our first conversation, “I wasn’t educated enough. I’m not a politico. I don’t like politics. ... Plenty of people in my family and friends are political but it’s not something I care about. I get too frustrated by it.” Lacking motivation to further engage herself politically and pressed into participating in each election cycle, the loyalty she felt towards the Republican Party initially influenced Paula to vote for Trump despite her disdain for his behaviour. Further, she “vehemently opposed Hillary,” a feeling that was only strengthened by the rhetoric she heard coming from other members of her online-social circle. The efficacy of online social media groups in reaffirming her confirmation bias proved particularly powerful in guiding her decision to vote for and even defend the actions of Donald Trump.

Leading up to the 2016 election, Paula's son attempted to change his mother's mind by appealing to her own experiences with sexual assault. She remembers him telling her that, "He's a misogynist. He's been accused of rape. He's a sexual predator. He's not nice. He would ask [me] 'How could you of all people vote for him?'" Despite this, Paula recalls feeling blindsided by Trump. Influenced by her own confirmation bias and lack of political exposure, Paula felt like she was, "[Part] of a cult. It was horrible. I tell people only half-jokingly, I've been deprogrammed." This deprogramming could not have occurred without the help of her eldest daughter. Unlike those I have discussed so far, Paula's exit occurred because of the deliberate and direct actions of others. As she explained:

What really changed my mind was about a year ago [2019] my older daughter. We were visiting her out of state, and she sat us down and explained the whole story of Trump and the complex web of cronies and corruption... and after hearing the story. There was no going back. I knew little bits and pieces, but I didn't have everything connected and when it was presented to me that way. I couldn't undo it ... I could see the truth in it. So now I just think he's despicable and I have no patience for him.

Having come to this realization, Paula also began to reflect on what she felt were the consequences of her actions in 2016. Mainly the impact it had on members of her family. As she further explained, she regrets voting for Trump not only because of what Trump did while president, but also because of the impact that it had on her children:

At the time during the 2016 vote or election, my son and elder daughter were really upset with me because I was supporting Trump and begged me not to vote for him and my younger daughter who is not interested in politics is married to an Asian

immigrant and he was horrified that I voted for Trump. And that's been a real learning process.

When asked what she meant by “real learning process” Paula explained to me that her experience with Trump has forced her to revisit how she thinks about race and privilege in the United States. The United States is no stranger to racism and nativism. Indeed, many scholars have argued that Trump is a figure of continuity rather than one of change (Decker, 2019 and Jiang, 2016). Although Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric was central to his campaign in 2016, many have critiqued the oversimplification of attributing this solely to racism. As Hochschild, (2016) points out, in the years leading up to Trump, there was a growing feeling among primarily older white Americans that government programs such as affirmative action were providing an unfair advantage to migrants, racial minorities, and underrepresented groups. This anti-government feeling fed perfectly into the message that conservatism in the United States sought to defend against government regulation and intervention. As the 2016 election showed, Trump was able to effectively weaponize the notion that the problems facing the average American citizen were the fault of the government, migrants, and social programs. Indeed, prior to her political shift, Paula admitted to being one of these individuals going so far as to dismiss the discrimination her son-in-law claimed to face daily. “For a long time, I thought he's being hypersensitive. [I thought] he's misunderstanding. It's a cultural difference and he's not getting it.” Paula's political journey was more than just a realization about Trump, it was a re-evaluation of herself as a white person living in the United States.



When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the United States saw a massive spike in anti-Asian rhetoric and hate crimes. It was during the first year of the pandemic that Paula recalls truly starting to understand what her son-in-law goes through:

This year has been a big part of my white privilege education. Listening to my son-in-law, knowing what he puts up with on a daily basis. He's Mongolian and he is treated so badly and just walking around, you know, people say terrible things to him. And I think if I knew these people, I might think that they were nice decent people. I might like them. But when they're in an environment where they feel free to say whatever they want to, and they do.

For Paula and others like her, Trump helped to spotlight the systemic racism that individuals like her had not borne witness to. As Peggy McIntosh observes, "White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks" (McIntosh, 1989, pg. 278). As I inferred from our conversations, Paula never fully understood what White privilege was nor did she realize the impact it had on her life. Although racism and nativism has always been present in the United State, it is capable of remaining hidden within the suffering of everyday life (see Farmer, 2009). Paula, is one of many that believes Trump created a platform for these individuals to stand on and allowed underlying racism to emerge from the shadows (see Bell, 2019). This was yet another factor in dictating Paula's choice to speak up during the 2020 elections.

Central to Paula's political identity shift was the desire to atone for actions in 2016. Reflecting on her actions during the 2016 election, she remembers being, "just a rabid bitch, in support of Trump in 2016" and was "ashamed of the way [she] behaved!" As with Harry and his decision to contribute a small symbolic sum to Biden's campaign,

Paula felt she shared in the collective guilt associated with getting Trump elected in 2016. While Chapter Six will discuss the details and subsequent consequences of Paula's penance, she expressed to me that none of this would have been possible without the willingness of her eldest daughter to sit down and talk with her about these issues. Throughout our many conversations Paula would routinely express to me the gratitude she feels towards her daughter for taking the time and explaining to her these issues rather than cutting her out of her life.

*Cathy*

On October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Cathy reached out to me on Facebook expressing interest in my research. During our first conversation, she explained how her departure from the Republican Party stemmed from a deeply personal experience with racism that she attributed to Trumpism. A self-proclaimed conservative and Reagan Republican, Cathy has been an active member of the Republican Party since the 1970s. Having grown increasingly miserable due to rising inflation, gas prices, and political tension, Cathy sought to elevate her involvement in politics by voicing her opinions about the issues that she felt directly affected her. Since that time, she has been a registered Republican, running in several local elections and running several political campaigns in her home state of California.

As was explained to me, Cathy based her perception of conservatism off political figures like Ronald Reagan. Throughout our conversations, Cathy referred to Reagan as a prototypical (see Lakoff, 1987; Turner et al., 1987) conservative whose economic and social policies embodied her own fiscal and moral beliefs. Cathy strongly supports the

neoliberal politics that Reagan and Meyer labelled as part of the American conservative movement and when asked about socially conservative issues such as abortion, Cathy explained to me that although she identifies as pro-life, she does not believe this to be part of her conservative identity. She further clarified that she tries not to let her religious beliefs influence her decision in the same way that it might for a single-issue voter. Like several other former Republicans that I spoke with, she firmly believed that the choice to have an abortion should be left up to the individual and not government. For the government to do so would directly contradict the minimalist approach that she saw as integral to American conservatism. For Cathy, being a conservative is more about fiscal issues such as budgets and debt than social issues like abortion.

Cathy's decision to vote for Trump in 2016 was dictated by both the bonds of loyalty she felt towards the Republican Party as well as her dislike of Clinton. This support for Trump continued until a traumatic experience forced her to reconsider her political alignment and prompted her departure from the Republican Party. Trump's 2016 campaign relied heavily on an anti-immigrant mentality. His promise to "build a wall" along the USA-Mexico border became a staple of his 2016 campaign. Trump promoted the idea that Mexico was sending "drugs and rapists" into the United States, perpetuated racial stereotypes, and catered to the xenophobia and nativism that had been festering within the United States. The language that Trump used spoke directly to the individual that saw the increased presence of immigrants as a threat to the American way of life. Cathy told me that she had never been anti-immigrant but had and still is anti-illegal immigration. She told me that she believes that "everybody should do it the right way"

and should not be able to skirt the rules. However, she also explained that until she had to go through the process with her husband, she failed to consider how convoluted and difficult it was to navigate the American immigration system.

Cathy's husband is a former athlete from Venezuela. After falling in love, he came to join her in the United States having been forced to leave by threats of violence against his life. Wanting to do it the "right way," they went through the lengthy legal processes which ended up costing them about \$38,000 in legal fees. After he was finally approved to work in the United States, they began their life together in the United States. As Cathy recounted to me:

I thought, Wow. Finally, we made it! I didn't realize there's the next step. And the next step is you have to appear to get your passport. And that next step under Trump changed where you actually had to leave the country and appear at the consulate out of the country. So, I thought, okay, you know, we're following the rules and will just do that. And a lot of people in California go to Mexico because it's convenient. When you go there you get your stamp and your home for dinner. Well, I found out the hard way once we were already in Mexico that Trump had decided not to approve anybody from Venezuela. About 80% of people just got denied for no reason. So now, I'm like, wait, this wasn't supposed to happen, we're following the rules [sic].

In direct contradiction to Cathy's belief in the structure of law and order, her husband's denied entry shattered the illusion that the rules were in place to help guide people through the legal process of entering the United States.

After being denied entry, he was detained in one of the many detention centers constructed along the US-Mexico border. Following his detention, Cathy's husband fell

seriously ill due to appalling conditions and a lack of medical attention. As she went on to explain:

He had to apply for asylum to get back, and he was put in detention. He got the flu and pneumonia. He got no medical attention and almost died. When he was almost dead, they put him in a bus and drove him off for hours to die. And if we didn't have an attorney, he would be dead. I saw how these detention centers were. I've been in four of them and I had a moment where I thought I no longer lived in the United States. So, I felt betrayed and that's the moment when I went from being a Trump supporter to well not.

Cathy's experience with Trump's anti-immigration policies had a profound impact on her. In addition to shifting her political alignment, it forced her to reconcile with the ongoing racial and social issues in the United States. As a person who had believed in doing things the "right way" her experience helped her to realize that many of the individuals housed in these detention centers did not attempt to enter the United States illegally. She would go on to tell me how horrible the conditions were in these detention centers and how she was disgusted and shocked that anyone, let alone *her* Republican Party, would allow humans to be treated that way. Bearing witness to the way that her husband and others were being treated opened her eyes to what the Republican Party had become under Trump. Reflecting on her memories of Reagan, Cathy could not recall the same anti-immigrant rhetoric dominating the Republican Party. For Cathy the party was no longer the party of Reagan; it was a "party of white nationalists." With this experience came further personal awakening as she began to see more and more evidence of racism, nativism, and xenophobia within the United States, particularly within the Republican Party.

In addition to turning away from Trump, Cathy explained that this experience left a permanent impact on her as a white person living in the United States. As Cathy explained during our second time speaking together, “I think as a white person living in the suburbs, I probably wasn’t aware of how hurtful some of racist things being said are. You know? I didn’t notice it. I don’t know why I didn’t know about it but for some reason, it wasn’t on my radar.” In keeping with Renan’s (1882/2018) argument that nation building involves the act of forgetting foundational violence, Behdad (2005) argues that the disavowed history of colonial America is a critical component of America’s national identity. The historical amnesia paramount to the foundation of the United States successfully omits the violent and shameful history of the American immigration system. Trump served as a significant rupture to this pattern of historical amnesia by bringing attention to patterns of structural and colonial violence inherent to the American immigration system. Thus, when forced to face the structural and institutional racism being perpetuated by prominent Republican figures such as Donald Trump, Cathy no longer saw the same moral values that had first drawn her into the Republican Party. Faced with no alternative, Cathy felt that she was forced to exit the party in search of a political identity that more closely aligned with her moral, social, and religious values.

Along with this realization came an additional shift for Cathy. She increasingly felt a sense of stigma was associated with a Republican identity. She eventually sought to distance herself from the party through a complete disownment of her party label. During our third conversation in early 2021 Cathy admitted to me that:

My heart is not with the Republican Party, I literally hate what they stand for now...I was trying to tell my friends, "I'm sorry. But when people think you're Republican there's a lot of people that associate that with racism." And so I don't want to be thought of as that. I don't want somebody to say, "Oh she is a Republican" "Oh, she must be a racist." I don't want anybody to ever think that about me.

Although racism is not exclusive to the actions of either political party, the stigma that Cathy feels embodies the Republican label has emboldened her to denounce any further membership. Considering the fear Cathy has of being grouped in with other outspoken and visible racism coming from the Republican Party, this part of her has become a spoiled identity (see Goffman, 1963/2014). However, as with Bravo, Cathy has not disavowed her conservativeness. Rather, she has discarded the party which currently holds power over that term. Cathy still believes in the power of a free market and trickle-down neoliberal economics popularised by Reagan. Cathy still upholds limiting the role of government to protecting the rights of its citizens and the traditions of William Buckley Jr. What Cathy rejects is the use of conservative to justify singular issues commonly associated with one's moral or religious beliefs.

The above-mentioned rejection of social conservative rhetoric was particularly evident in the frustration caused by what she identified as the collapse of core conservative values within the Republican Party. Specifically, the focus on social conservatism, abortion, and immigration while simultaneously abandoning what she identified as traditional fiscal conservatism. Without the bonds of loyalty that had held her to the party, she explained that it had become glaringly obvious how far removed the conservatism of a Trump led Republican party had strayed from her internalized image of

American conservatism. When asked why she believes this to be the case, she explained to me that she largely attributes this shift to a rise in single issue voters within the Republican Party. For individuals like Cathy the single-issue voter remains a prominent barrier prohibiting attempts to correct the Republican Party implementation of conservative thought. As she explained, “the Republican Party used to be multifaceted. And we now have come down to a single-issue voter, they have a template and a litmus test that goes on to every single candidate... these single-issue voters that can’t see the bigger picture.” Cathy went on to explain how she feels alienated from the average Trump voter partly because of her inability to speak to them about the previously identified core values. Trapped within a single political narrative that revolves around one key issue, she feels there is no room for discourse with the single-issue voter.

This inability to speak with her fellow members presented itself as a barrier for establishing the necessary bonds of membership that hold together the imagined community that we know of as American conservatism. Speaking with her former friends, many of whom are social conservatives, Cathy finds very little in common as a self-proclaimed fiscal conservative. Cathy sees none of the values she attributes to conservatism present within a Trump led party. What she instead sees is a consequence of the Southern Strategy that Barry Goldwater helped to implement. While Cathy still does not agree in full with the Democratic Party’s political platform, the overtly racist patterns of behaviours she observed have left her with no choice but to exit the Republican Party.



*Laura*

Sitting on her phone in her living room in Delaware, Laura, (72) has been a loyal Republican voter since Richard Nixon. However, leading up to the 2016 elections Laura remembers beginning to feel distant from the Republican Party. Reflecting on her feelings leading up to the election, Laura expressed to me during our first conversation that, “I guess by then I was much more of a moderate. The only reason I don’t register or call myself Independent is because I feel, you know, nine times out of ten my vote would be wasted.” It was this binary mindset that helped set in place Laura’s choice to vote for Trump in 2016. Unable to escape a two-party system Laura saw Trump as the lesser of two evils when faced with the choice between Trump and Clinton. Unwilling to throw her vote away by voting third party, Laura felt that Trump was the better choice between the two.

In addition, Laura said she was further influenced by her brother-in-law. She explained that he helped to convince her that Trump would be the next Ronald Reagan if elected. Laura told me that she remembers thinking:

Well, I liked Reagan and if Trump would be the same [as Reagan] then maybe he would not be so bad. Even though I knew he had some bankruptcies in his past. And I knew he had a filthy mouth, and I knew he didn’t respect women. I thought he’d be a businessman, I thought he’d bring in intelligent people. I thought he’d take their advice. I really did. I...well I didn’t know then as much as I know now.

As highlighted, Reagan stands as the idealized conservative figure in the minds of many Republican voters. He is the prototype (Lakoff, 1987, Turner et al., 1987) that comes to mind when one thinks of American conservatism in the age of Buckley and the golden

age of *National Review*. The likeness to Reagan helped to further convince Laura to vote for Trump in the hope that he would bring positive change to the party. With the help of her brother-in-law, Laura was willing to overlook past certain aspects of Trump in favour of an idealized version of Trump inspired by the familiar traditions of the Republican Party. Tired of the same political establishment, Laura saw Trump as a chance for a fresh start. However, as time passed it became clear to Laura that Trump did not embody the type of conservative traditions that had drawn her to Reagan and the Republican Party. He did not exhibit the type of fiscal responsibility, the financial prudence, and overall conservative values that comprised her political identity. Still, it took until the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020 for Laura to fully recognize this.

During the outbreak of the pandemic, Trump continuously attempted to downplay the seriousness of Covid-19 by denying the facts presented to him by medical advisors and promoting misinformation. Laura recalled being particularly disturbed by Trump's comment that suggested bleach could be injected as a treatment for Covid-19. "I thought this is it. The last thing I need is someone who tells his people to inject bleach into themselves." Like many others, Laura lost faith in Trump's ability to lead once the pandemic hit the United States. And just as was the case with each of my interlocutors, it took time to come to this realization. Unlike Cathy, whose change was triggered by a sudden and unexpected trauma, Laura's political shift was a slow gradual buildup that peaked during the early months of the pandemic. As with others, it highlights a pattern of slow and gradual growth motivated by specific triggering events.

However, Laura's journey out of a Trump led Republican Party is not synonymous with a total shift in political identity. As Laura emphatically stated, "I don't consider myself liberal...I in fact have a lot of relatives on my [one] side of my family that are like total liberals and I get upset with a lot of things they say." I asked Laura to explain what these issues are. She clarified that because of her background in accounting she believes that:

You can't do everything for everybody. You can't send everybody to college for free and you can't feed everybody for free. We can't keep everybody on welfare for the rest of their lives... I mean, yeah, I feel sorry for people who are living on welfare and stuff like that. But not so sorry for them that I don't say go out and get damn job. So that's mostly why I consider myself a conservative. It's pretty much financial. I believe in State's rights. I believe in fiscal conservativeness.

Laura echoes the economic concerns of Hayek and Kirk and the desire to shift away from the welfare state. Her notion of conservative embodies the early years of *National Review* and what William Buckley Jr. sought to bring forth to the American people. The notion of "The American Dream" and the importance of hard work all remain a core part of Laura's political ideology. Yet having watched Trump tear down the conservative traditions she equated to the Republican Party, she began to question why she ever voted for Trump in the first place. Now as an outsider no longer heavily influenced by the bonds of political solidarity, Laura has acquired a newfound perspective that allowed her to realize she could no longer identify with the current Republican Party. As she later said to me, "The Republican Party today is not the Republican Party that I've been a member of for the last 50 years. I can't even call it the Republican Party anymore." Having been given the chance to exit this "cult" Laura like many others I spoke with feel that the values that had

previously bound her to the Republican Party as a “conservative” had vanished well before Trump.

During our second interview which took place immediately following the results of the 2020 election, I spoke with Laura about whether she still believed herself conservative considering the changes brought forth by Trump. Free from the confines of party membership Laura explained how she had spent considerable time reflecting on the changes to American conservative thought. As she told me, “I think conservatism as I thought about it kind of started slipping away when we started losing a lot of our jobs and stuff like that... [I]t’s changed over the years away from what my way of thinking was, and I don’t think that it is ever coming back.” She went on to explain that while she still considers herself conservative, she feels her definition is far removed from what she sees emerging from the Republican Party. As Laura’s comments inferred, the habitual tendency to equate the term “liberal” with socialist traditions has led to an overall rejection of the term within conservative ideology. It speaks to the success of William Buckley Jr. and Frank Meyer, both of whom built a mobilized political movement using anti-collectivist rhetoric to bind together classical libertarians and traditionalist conservatives. Thus, prior to Trump the term liberal invoked for Laura the image of a “far-left” Democratic candidate that she feared would abandon the cautious approach to social changes. However, placed within the environment that Trump has created, she now feels that the liberal approach of the Democratic Party presents a suitable alternative. It was for this reason that Laura felt that she could in good countenance vote for Joe Biden

in 2020. Placed in between two political extremes Biden emerges as the most closely adaptable version of the conservative prototype.

### *Sally*

I first met Sally on October 23, 2020, not long after her 64<sup>th</sup> birthday. At the time Sally was living in Oklahoma, a Republican stronghold since 1968. Sally grew up in a family that has voted Republican since the American Civil War establishing a long history of loyalty to the party. Sally worked for 23 years at a public library before retiring in 2017. However, her love of teaching children brought her back to the classroom in 2018 when she accepted a job as substitute high school teacher. Despite not liking Trump, Sally decided to vote for him in 2016. When I asked her why, she explained that she is surrounded by a very right wing, very Evangelical culture that she feels limits her exposure to other political viewpoints. Further, Sally felt she lacked the ethos necessary to engage in political conversations leading up to the 2016 elections. Finally, as a person who identifies as a “pro-life” Sally felt that the Republicans anti-abortion stance fit with her own religious and conservative values. As Sally explained:

In 2016 we had the choice between Trump and Clinton. I really didn't like Hillary Clinton and she was, you know, plainly pro-choice. And while I didn't like Donald Trump. He was a Republican candidate [and] the Republicans traditionally support pro-life.

Sally was one of several individuals I spoke with that cited the social conservative pro-life platform as something that was central to their political self. Ever since Nixon raised the issue of abortion in 1971 by directing abortion policies at U.S. military bases (Daynes and Tatalovich, 1992), abortion has divided the two political parties. For individuals like

Sally, the issue of abortion goes beyond partisan lines. It is an issue of morality binding together her religious beliefs with the political conservatism embraced by the Republican Party. In the religious context, compared to the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, despite its flaws, comes off as the morally righteous platform. Thus, guided by habitual voting patterns, lack of exposure, and religious morality Sally found herself voting for Trump in 2016.

Two years into Trump's presidency several teachers in Sally's area went on strike in response to the ongoing cuts to education. It was during this time that Sally began to question her choice to vote for Trump and the Republican Party. She explained that Oklahoma currently ranks last in terms of roads, education, and several other social services due to cuts made by the Republican Party in the state. As Sally expressed in a moment of frustration, "It's terrible. And one of the problems I have with the Republican Party is they have taken the whole tax thing to such an extreme that they don't want to fund education. They don't want to fund Medicaid. They don't want to fund anything that would help the common good." As she went on to tell me:

Sally: The Republicans I grew up around would have never, [let this happen]. It would never have entered their mind that public education isn't a government service. They never would have said we need to cut [education]. You know?...

Kyle: Yeah. So was this the moment that you left the party or....

Sally: So, in 2018...I think that's when I realized that the Republicans in power were nothing like the Republicans that I grew up with. But I kind of rationalized to myself, you know, well I can, you know, stay in the Republican Party and maybe go cause trouble...maybe change things.

Rather than resorting to exiting the party, Sally felt that staying with the party would provide her additional credibility and influence by providing her a chance to voice her discontent (see Hirschman, 1970). Placed within a system that seeks to limit voter choices, the power to have a say in who would run as the next Republican candidate initially allowed her to overlook the stigma attached to the party. Yet as with many others, Sally eventually hit a point where this option also became unavailable as the desired changes she sought grew further and further out of reach.

Like many others, this moment came during the Covid-19 pandemic. The response to pandemic restrictions highlighted the stark division between the two parties and spotlight the extremism that had been silently growing on each side of the political spectrum. While the teachers strike in 2018 had her questioning her choice to remain with the Republican party, the pandemic proved to be the turning point in her choice to change her voter registration. As Sally clarified during a later interview:

Sally: I started really questioning it around the teacher strike around that time period, but it didn't hit you know really hit me full blown until the pandemic. You know we were out of school, and I was watching a lot of news cable news and not Fox thank God! But I started watching a lot of cable news and kind of seeing firsthand how batshit crazy Donald Trump was! We all knew that going in, and I voted for him in 2016. I think it was more the Republican Party and the Republicans around him that could have had the courage to say no and didn't. That turned me away. That I think is what got me more than anything.

Kyle: It wasn't just Trump it's the fact that the party refused to act then?

Sally: Yes. They clearly were just covering their own asses and trying to maintain their own power and let the country go to hell, and to me if you're an elected official you know that's just unforgivable.

The refusal on the part of the other members of the Republican party to stand up to Trump coupled with his response to the pandemic was the final element that triggered Sally shift in political membership. In mid 2020 during one of Trump's White House press briefings, she got her iPad and officially changed her party registration from Republican to an Independent. When asked why she did not change it to Democrat she explained to me that she might in the future but right now still did not feel her political ideals fully aligned with those of the Democratic party. Like many others, she not only felt a degree of comfort from remaining in the middle free from the bonds of political membership, but also could not align her political ideology with either of the two parties.

I later inquired into how her decision to depart the Republican party has impacted her status as a conservative and whether she still felt any degree of affinity towards the Republican Party. As she told me,

Well, I think true conservatives that haven't already left the Republican Party will shortly be doing... if you think of [Trump] like cancer you know we got the main tumour out... but the cancer has clearly metastasized and it's going to be a lot harder longer slog for Democracy to get the rest of [his supporters] out. ... I just can't stay in the Republican party because the party I knew no longer exists.

Throughout this conversation I was repeatedly reminded of the following quote by Samuel Huntington, "the true enemy of the conservative is not the liberal but the extreme radical no matter what ideational theory he may espouse" (Huntington, 1957, pg. 460). As Sally pointed out, for individuals like herself American conservatism has embraced the



most extreme versions of individualism and libertarianism driving away the more moderate conservative members of the Republican party. The party of Trump has embraced the very thing that Buckley and his fellow editors fought to hold back. As she later said, “*We* [the Republican Party pre-Trump] believe in limited government, but not in the draconian sense that *they* [the current Republican party] do today.” The distinction between the two, through Sally’s use of *we* vs. *they* reflects the degree of separation she felt from the Republican party. Trump had driven away members of the party that had embraced the conservatism of Buckley and Kirk. It has prompted many including Sally to tell me that they wanted to see the party torn down and rebuilt to heal the nation.

In 2022 I followed up with Sally in the hopes of hearing further updates on how her departure had impacted members of her family. During our conversation Sally told me that since her departure and lack of participation in the Republican Party she has begun to question her understanding of what conservatism means particularly in relation to her former party. When asked to clarify she explained that:

I don’t know that I’m as conservative, as I, as I once was. You know I’ve changed my opinions on gay marriage and social programs. I used to not be on board with that and now I’m like and I don’t know if that’s because I’m older and I’m needing [these programs]. Was it purely self-interest that I changed my views on that? I don’t think so, but that’s entirely possible being completely honest.

Free from the influence of the Republican Party Sally has been able to re-evaluate key issues that had until recently dictated her relationship to other members of her former political community. As I found to be the case amongst every person that cited a lack of political engagement as their reason for voting for Trump, the exposure to new forms of

political thought fundamentally changed how they think about key issues. In short, the political freedom gained from exiting from the Republican Party not only changed how my interlocutors identified, but it also fundamentally altered the internalized notion of what defines American conservative values.

***By way of concluding***

For each of the above-mentioned cases, the choice to vote for Trump was dictated by a myriad of factors. In many cases, the structural violence imposed upon them by a binary political system forced many to remain loyal to their political party despite the disdain harboured towards Trump. This was made easier by the quite often equal disdain felt towards Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. In other cases, the desire to see a business approach to governing allowed for the construction of a fanciful version of Trump. However, Trumpism would ultimately prove to be a radical departure from the social and political norms that my interlocutors associated with the Republican Party. Trump challenged the meaning of political conservatism, driving away individuals like Sally and Laura that had remained loyal to the Republican Party despite rising disdain for certain political policies. For others who were holding out hope that Trump would be a break from the status quo, his rejection of core conservative values proved contradictory to the notion that Trump represented American conservatism. Further, the Republican Party's decision to at times embrace Trumpism dissolved any hope that my interlocutors could continue to occupy a space within the Republican Party.

In each case, my interlocutors found themselves frustrated by the contradictions Trumpism created. Trump and the Republican Party claimed to represent social

conservatism and the pro-life movement, yet my interlocutors saw a complete disregard for human life. Whether this be the mistreatment of migrants as highlighted by Cathy's experience or his actions during a pandemic that would end up costing over one million Americans their lives, conservatism under Trump was no longer synonymous with morality. In such a context, it was no longer possible to justify identifying with said community without also embracing an equally immoral identity. For the fiscal conservative, Trump claimed to embrace fiscal conservatism but routinely failed to live up to the expectations of my fiscally conservative interlocutors. In each case, Trump's failure to uphold the guiding principles that governed my interlocutor's political self was paramount to their choice to exit the party.

More importantly, Trump acted as a wakeup call by bringing attention to the changes that had slowly been occurring within the Republican Party. For those that voted for Trump in 2016, the willingness to overlook changes in American conservative discourse had been reinforced by habitual loyalty to a party claiming to still embody the fiscal liberalism of Hayek and/or the traditionalism of Kirk. Trump proved to be the force required in lifting the veil that members of the Republican Party had hid behind with the promise of these traditions. However, as the next chapter will show, it was not only former Trump voters that had their political identity altered during the four years Trump was president. The Republican Party's embrace of Trumpism fundamentally altered the relationship that non-Trump Republicans had with the party. It has changed the opinions of those who stayed with the party either out of loyalty or in the hopes of a return to normalcy in a post-Trump world. In the wake of Trump, even those that did not vote for

him in 2016 found themselves without a home as his influence, rhetoric, and mannerisms spread throughout what was once their party.

## **Chapter Five**

### **The Former Republican**

*I don't feel like I left the Republican Party, I think the Republican Party left me.*

– Anonymous

While the individuals discussed in Chapter Four found themselves shifting away from the Republican Party after having voted for Trump in 2016, many former Republicans rejected Trump and the ensuing hostile political climate prior to the 2020 election. Often referred to as Never-Trumpers or RINOs<sup>19</sup>, many of these individuals found themselves drifting away from the Republican Party as early as 2000 with the rise of social conservatism during the Bush era. However, like those previously discussed, each of these individuals finds themselves trapped within a circumstance not of their choosing but, “within which they must make their history” (Asad, 1987, pg. 607) as hostilities between an increasingly polarized two-party system trapped them in a never-ending cycle of conflict and violence. As Trump capitalized on growing feelings of resistance and hostility between the two sides, those who sought balance and compromise found that they were pushed further and further away from the Republican Party. Echoing the phenomenon observed by Hochschild (2016), Trumpism left many feeling as though they were “strangers in their own lands.”<sup>20</sup> Unable to recognize *their* Republican Party, many were forced to adapt their conservative habits to fit new political identities. In most

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<sup>19</sup> Republican In Name Only

<sup>20</sup> The term stranger in his own land is borrowed from Arlie Russell Hochschild in reference to the feelings of abandonment and isolation felt by supporters of the Tea Party in Louisiana.

cases, the feeling could be summarized by a statement that one of my interlocutors said to me in December of 2020, “I did not leave the Republican Party. The Republican party left me.” While the following individuals still strongly identify with the core values that they define as conservative and which drew them towards the Republican Party, instances of extraordinary violence that have since disrupted their lives make it nearly impossible to justify staying with the Republican Party. Events like the Covid-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter protests, and January 6<sup>th</sup> not only challenged my interlocutor’s notion that the Republican Party sought to uphold the values they associated with American conservatism, but they shattered the hope of returning to a pre-Trump party.

### *Mary*

The first of these individuals is Mary, a 36-year-old female living in Florida. Due to scheduling conflicts, I was not able to speak with her until right after the 2020 election. When I did speak to Mary on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020, she had just finished working a 10-hour nursing shift in a critical care unit. Sitting at her dining room table still in her nursing scrubs and phone in hand, Mary and I spoke for over three hours the first evening. Despite Mary having been awake and active for over 15 hours, the nature of the conversation was such that I never saw any sign of exhaustion or lack of enthusiasm. With the results of the election known, our conversation was far less speculative than it had been with other individuals. Still with Trump having not conceded the election, there remained a degree of uncertainty as to the future of the country. At that time, Mary told me that she saw herself as a moderate Republican and fiscal conservative with strong liberal social values. Trump’s lack of morals and fiscal irresponsibility were two of the

main reasons why she did not vote for him in 2016 and 2020. She further clarified that Trump's lack of fiscal conservatism has allowed her to distinguish her own conservative imaginary from those who currently support Trump. As she stated, "there is a clear difference between what, to me, Republicans are originally, and what they are now, which I guess is the party of Trump." During the nearly three hours that we spent talking together, she explained that her belief in the values of a pre-Trump Republican Party kept her from abandoning her political identity. Although her social values fall in line with those of the Democratic Party, her faith in the power of a free-market economy and the pride she feels for American capitalism draws her towards a now fictional version of the Republican Party. Finally, she cited her patriotic ties in connection to support for the United States military. As she explained, she feels that the Republican party has been a stronger supporter of the military than the Democrats.

Although her fiscal conservative values kept her loyalty to the Republican Party, her opinions on topics typically associated with social conservatism starkly contrasted the current opinions of the Republican Party. Denouncing the social conservative views and rhetoric she emphasized, "I'm absolutely pro-choice! I'm absolutely pro-science! I'm absolutely anti-racism and unmistakably pro- LGBTQ2S+ rights and equality!" Deeply disturbed by the rising patterns of social conservatism within the Republican Party, Mary admitted that she had already started to veer away from the party during Obama's first run for office in 2009. Coming out of the Bush era, social conservative rhetoric was becoming increasingly prominent among members of the conservative right. As these

merged with the same type of all-or-nothing rhetoric of Trump it fostered an environment that was increasingly hostile to individuals like herself. As she explained,

And those [social] issues before were like only a portion of us in the Republican Party. Some I guess you know firmly took a stand on those issues. A lot of us just kind of went like okay well fiscally, [the Republican Party] makes sense to me and the other things I guess we can just kind of work them out along the way. Today, it doesn't seem like that's an option anymore. Today, it feels like we're at a point where if you don't stand for those things, then you're actively standing against them.

The shift that has occurred within the Republican Party has left Mary caught in a culture war between the two dominant political factions. Trapped by circumstances created by historical traditions beyond her control, Mary finds herself actively defending her political and moral values from members of the religious right. Despite this, Mary chose to hold onto her Republican identity in the hopes that the situation would improve once Trump left office. This feeling of attachment was further heightened by the sense of duty she felt towards working to repair the damage done by Trump. She explained that she was not ready to give up on *her* party and believed that in a post-Trump world the far-right would either split off from the party or that their voices would slowly fade into the background.

This all changed for Mary on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021. On that day hundreds of Trump supporters stormed the United States Capitol Building in an attempt to overturn and/or disrupt the electoral certification process. It was the first time in history that the Confederate battle flag flew inside the Capitol, a feat never managed by the Confederate army during the American Civil War (Cramer, 2021). As previously highlighted, one of



the core ideas binding Mary to the Republican Party was her sense of patriotism and respect for the United States Armed Forces. This extended beyond the persons currently serving and included the very ideas that America embodied. This includes freedom, democracy, and the power of the United States Constitution. Following the attack, an analysis by *The New York Times* found that at least 140,000 Republicans had quit the party across 25 states (Corasantini et al., 2021). Speaking with Mary a few weeks later, I learned that she was one of those individuals. As she told me when I asked if anything had changed for her in the weeks since the election,

Mary: Well one thing that is new is that I am no longer registered Republican.

Kyle: Oh? What happened? When did you make the decision to leave?

Mary: Officially it was January 6<sup>th</sup> that made me decide to leave. As I think I told you when we last spoke, I was still kind of like a separate arm of [the Republican party]. I felt part of it, but only as like a placeholder until things got better. But the more I have seen the way things have gone down the more it becomes obvious that it's a faulty party.

January 6<sup>th</sup> was a moment of reckoning for Mary. It was on that day that she realized the Republican Party she knew and loved was no more. Further, it was the moment she lost all faith that she might be able to repair the Republican Party. As several high-ranking members of the Republican Party continued to uphold the claim that the 2020 election was invalid and the actions of the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrectionists were a valid form of protest, it proved a direct attack on Mary's closest values. This was made worse by the fact that all but seven Senate Republicans voted to acquit Trump. Their refusal to hold Trump accountable affirmed for Mary that the Republican Party no longer cared about members

of the armed forces who fought and died to defend *her* country. January 6<sup>th</sup> expunged the image from Mary's mind that the Republican Party cared about democratic values or the language of the Constitution. Faced with this prospect, Mary ultimately made the decision to exit the party.

Unlike several others that I spoke with, Mary felt that her departure from the Republican Party left her with no other choice than to align herself with the Democratic left. One reason for this was the previously discussed binary system that forces upon individuals the expectation that one must identify with one of two political parties. However, the four years that Trump was in office exerting his ideology, or lack thereof, upon the Republican Party fundamentally altered the relationship many Americans had with conservatism. Trump forced many to re-evaluate what it meant to call oneself conservative and whether the Republican Party still embodied those values. Having exited the Republican Party, Mary explained to me that she still believes in concepts that she attributes to fiscal conservatism. Concepts such as a free market economy, capitalism, and limited government. All of these remain a part of Mary's political self. However, when she compares Trump's Republican Party to Biden, she finds that "Joe Biden reflects conservatism fiscally, more so than the Republican Party does." Furthermore, the all or nothing rhetoric that individuals like Newt Gingrich brought forth which were later normalized during the Bush administration left Mary feeling rejected and unwanted by the Republican Party.

In contrast to the Republican Party, Mary explained that she feels as though, "The left has made a space for people like me" and that "I guess I am part of the left now." The

nature of the political changes brought forth by Trump not only disrupted Mary's place within a particular political community, but it also fundamentally changed her perception of the world around her. Based on our time together, Mary gave no indication that she was any more or less conservative than she was prior to her departure from the Republican Party. However, with Trump serving as a common foe, Mary found herself more in tune with the Democratic Party despite her conservative nature.

### *Charlie*

While individuals like Mary embraced a new political identity, others fought to hold onto the Republican name. One of these individuals was Charlie, a 76-year-old disabled Vietnam Veteran currently living in Prescott, Arizona. Charlie's experience was perhaps the most powerful and emotionally charged than anyone that I spoke with. When I first met Charlie in September 2020, he identified himself to me as a Republican who leans slightly right of center. We would often speak mid-afternoon so that he could escape the mid-day sun. Sitting inside the caravan he lives in, a pipe filled with medicinal marijuana in hand, Charlie would share with me his thoughts and opinions on topics ranging from, the different types of firearms, his military career, politics, and the future of the United States.

He also told me that the area he lives in is dominated by a very conservative demographic to such an extent that he knows several individuals that are also members of far-right militia groups, including the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys. As a non-Trump voter, this puts Charlie in a near constant state of conflict with members of his community. As Charlie explained, "I am a conservative but a lot of my friends today they

call me a libtard<sup>21</sup>. And I scream back don't you call me a libtard.” In contrast to those around him who serve as the baseline from which to compare his own political self, he is labelled a liberal. As he further states, “It’s really interesting being a Republican minority and living in a conservative dominated community with a very few liberals. And most of my friends look at me as being very, very strange.” Charlie’s choice to refer to himself as a Republican minority in a conservative community highlights how far-removed Charlie’s vision of the Republican Party is from Trump’s conservative base. Charlie’s experience as a Republican minority would prove pivotal in helping to contextualize the lines of division and polarization that currently divides political communities within the United States.

Speaking further on membership to the Republican Party, Charlie explained that he thinks of himself as an Eisenhower Republican. Eisenhower was considered the last “liberal” Republican. By labelling himself as such, Charlie seeks to distance himself from what the party turned into following Goldwater and Reagan. Charlie’s loyalty to the Republican Party was not won through the social or religious conservatism of the 60s and 70s. Nor did he subscribe to the neoliberal economic policies that were brought into the Republican Party during the Reagan Revolution. Charlie specifically cited that he was and still is opposed to the infamous “Reaganomics” and remains a proponent of what he referred to as “socialist programs” including healthcare, education, and care for the country’s infrastructure. As he emphatically stated, “Every other Western democracy [has these]. Except one. [pauses] This one. We are failing as a country. We are failing the

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<sup>21</sup> Derogatory term that combines Liberal and Retard

people. And I remember the Republicans as being a party to help the people.” As mentioned in Chapter Two, the Republican Party changed dramatically in the years following Eisenhower’s presidency. Individuals like Barry Goldwater pushed back against programs like the New Deal while the social and economic reform introduced by Lyndon B. Johnson as part of the Great Society drew backlash from predominantly white Southern voters. As these former Democrats shifted their allegiance in support of the Republican Party, individuals like Charlie were slowly being left behind.

As Charlie later stated, “It was sometime in the mid 60s, when all of this changed, and the Republicans became what they are today. As did the Democrats. So, semantically speaking when the flip happened, I should have gone from being a Republican to being a Democrat. But I didn’t. I kept my registration<sup>22</sup>.” Despite recognizing the shift in political ideologies that occurred in the post-Eisenhower era, Charlie continued to identify as a member of the Republican Party. As was often the case, this choice was in part dictated by the differences Charlie observed between his conservative sense of self and that of the Democratic Party.

While Charlie disagreed with the neoliberal economic policies of Reagan and the social conservatism of the Bush Era, he was equally disturbed by the far-left rhetoric he attributes to the Democratic Party. After leaving the armed forces, Charlie worked as a park ranger, tour guide, and naturalist in Arizona’s national parks. During this time, he developed a strong attachment to the status quo. While strongly in favour of regulation

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<sup>22</sup> Speaking to Charlie in March 2023, he told me that registered as a Republican but “for the life of me I do not know why I still am.”

designed to protect the environment, he feels that these must be implemented by those who are familiar with the area and not enacted as sweeping federal regulations. Further, his experience growing up in California has since tainted his image of the Democrats ability to manage resources. He explained,

I grew up in California. And most people who have moved here in the last 10 years have come from California. California, which is a very liberal state in the North and a very conservative state in the South, destroyed their own economy and the environment.

Echoing the words of Buckley, Charlie voiced a concern at the possibility of sudden changes being implemented by a new more liberal population. Bothered by California's urban development and mismanagement of natural resources, he associates this political shift with the same people he believes ruined California. However, he simultaneously rejects and is rejected by his fellow conservatives who have since embraced Trumpism. Presented with only two options for political membership, his desire to separate himself from a largely imagined "other" reaffirms the feelings of loyalty he has towards a Republican Party albeit a defunct one free from the grasp of Trumpism.

However, the strongest source of attachment that Charlie feels towards his conservative self comes not from a political party but rather from a specific totem (see Durkheim, 1912/2008). This totem is the Constitution of the United States. During our first conversation together, he referred to himself as a "Constitutionalist," an identity that he defined as being committed to adhering to and preserving the Constitution in its entirety. As Charlie emphatically stated,

I believe firmly in the Constitution. In the entire Constitution. I read it. I have a copy of it on my bulletin board [shows the camera a small copy of the Constitution]. I do not cherry pick the Constitution. The Constitution is the most important document ever written. I love my country. I love the Constitution!

One of the first instances of violence against the Constitution that Charlie remembers happened a year into Trump's presidency. On August 12, 2017, groups of white supremacists, neo-Nazis, KKK, and the Far-Right held a rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Advertised as "Unite the Right," it drew responses from local activist groups that organized a counter-protest. At around 1:45 PM James Alex Fields, Jr. drove his car into a group of counter-protesters, killing one person and injuring another thirty five. After the attack Trump held a press conferencing during which time he stated, "You had some very bad people in that group, but you also had people that were **very fine people, on both sides** [emphasis added]." The words "very fine people, on both sides" left a profound impact on Charlie. Recalling what he saw when he watched the footage from the Unite the Right rally, he told me that he remembered seeing signs like "Jews shall not replace us" and other hateful rhetoric.

As a person that was raised Jewish, Trump's statement solidified Charlie's belief that what he saw coming from the Republican Party was racism. Furthermore, it was a

complete betrayal of the same oath he took as a member of the armed forces<sup>23</sup>. As he went on to explain, the rhetoric he saw coming from individuals claiming to belong to *his* Republican Party was the exact same rhetoric that he feels other veterans like him fought and died to defeat. Speaking to the issue of the flags that he saw being flown by Right (i.e., Nazi, and Confederate flags) he stated to me that these were,

The flags of losers! Losers of wars that veterans like me fought and died in to protect the world from tyranny and fascism. And them waving those flags right next to the American Flag and then Trump's comments [pauses to draw from pipe] it was like he had just spit on their graves.

For Charlie, these were the flags of the enemies foreign and domestic that he swore to protect against. The events in Charlottesville in 2017 not only reinforced the feelings of disgust for Trump, but it also began a shift for Charlie as he began to feel more and more that the Republican Party had openly embraced racism and hate.

While discussing his frustration with the racism he sees coming out of the Republican Party, Charlie was reminded of an encounter he had with a former friend named JT. JT is the leader of the local Oath Keepers, a far-right anti-government militia group with a history of violence and racism. As Charlie explained to me,

They [the Oath Keepers] hold meetings every two weeks at a local Baptist Church. And I have attended a couple of those meetings for various reasons,

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<sup>23</sup> All members of the armed forces are required to take the following oath, "I, \_\_\_\_\_, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God." (U.S. Congress, 1958).



mostly because I want to know what's going on when the world goes to hell...JT sits there and harangues his listeners with his hatred toward everything. Obama, Muslims, Jews. If you are not a fundamentalist Christian, you are not one of us. I have had to walk away from JT as someone I know...

As I sat there speaking with a visibly distressed Charlie, he explained how people whom he had once called friends were now strangers to him. When I asked Charlie if he could speak to me about a particular incident that stood out to him, he told me about a recent protest he witnessed in the downtown area. Earlier in the year while driving through downtown he passed a group of Black Lives Matter protesters peacefully marching in front of the courthouse. Opposite them stood a group of individuals Charlie broadly labelled the “Right.” He went on to add,

And the Left, the Left are marching up and down. Chanting, but you know it's peaceful. [Chanting] to “free this guy,” “listen to Black Lives Matter” you know their rhetoric. On the other side is a street and this is what I found astonishing because there were a few people there I knew! They’re shouting hate. Yelling swearing telling them to go home, calling them baby killers. Just a lot of hate. I really... [voice gets emotional] did not know how to react to that.

Charlie explained that this was the moment of total separation between himself and those around him. Seeing people that he recognized in the crowd profoundly impacted the interactions he had going forward. He explained to me that for the weeks following this event, he found that he was not interested in going out to the diner for coffee. When he did, he refused to speak to anyone. What he witnessed that day affirmed his belief that Trump was the primary reason for the division and hatred that he now sees within his community. As he later told me, “Before Trump this was a peaceful area. And now there

are Trump flags everywhere. And people are yelling and screaming at each other. There's more road rage and the divisiveness [voice trails off] ... I really do think we are looking at another civil war.” Throughout our conversations Charlie would at times refer to the prospect of civil war. Constantly confronted by social and political trauma, Charlie finds himself opposite members of his community that he once called friends.

Charlie and I spoke a lot about the ongoing conflict between himself and other members of his community. As he would later say, “Talking to people online, people I've known for years. They've come to hate me now. So this country has made it so divisive that I can't even talk to friends anymore and the lockdown and the coronavirus has only made the situation worse.” I asked Charlie how members living in his area had responded to the pandemic and whether Trump's anti-pandemic rhetoric had further divided members of his community. He told me that Trump's insistence to downplay the seriousness of the virus had been an additional source of conflict between him and other members of his community. As was often the case with Trump, Covid-19 generated a “with or against” response from many of his followers. Charlie's choice to wear a mask when he was outside was one of the reasons why his friends labelled him a liberal.

Speaking in October 2020, he recounted to me something that someone said to him while he was in town eating breakfast: “You're Republican and you believe that shit? The virus is a hoax.” Charlie told me that he ended up walking away from breakfast too angry to say anything but later recalled thinking to himself, “Ah, sure, the virus is a hoax. I've had three friends die from the virus. There's two more that are sick...” In contrast to other crises, Covid-19 proved to be a source of major division between the two political

groups. To believe in the existence of the virus was to contradict the word of Trump. Anyone who refused to conform to Trumpism was labelled as the enemy.

As the Republican Party moved to embrace Trumpism it left individuals like Charlie behind, caught between a party that rejected him for upholding his values and faith in the American Constitution, and a party that he rejects for pushing changes that he believes will destroy the country that he fought for. Even after the pandemic restrictions were lifted, Charlie had little desire to leave his house and see people in his community. Like so many others, Charlie was very much a “stranger in his own land” (see Hochschild, 2016). He was a conservative wandering within the Republican Party, unrecognized by its current members and disconnected from a party he once called his own.

Charlie and I spoke on a regular basis leading up to and following the 2020 election. Each time we spoke Charlie upheld his status as a Republican and a conservative. However, in each case, he prefaced this with the notion that the party currently calling itself Republican was not deserving of that title. In Charlie’s eyes, it had changed to where he could no longer call it the Republican Party. His loyalty lay not with the party but the values the name symbolized, reflecting a bygone era of American politics and the nostalgia these memories invoked. However, this all changed on January 6<sup>th</sup>. Like Mary, Charlie was deeply shaken by the events that unfolded. Speaking in the days immediately following January 6<sup>th</sup>, he told me that he firmly believed that any elected official that refused to condemn the actions of Trump had violated their oath of office. As he passionately told me,

They [Congress] swore an oath to the Constitution<sup>24</sup>. To protect the Constitution and they did nothing to protect the capital. And we got to watch – the world got to watch – as a mob of domestic terrorists invaded the capital and took it over. So, I am appalled. I was literally in tears watching this unfold on TV.

Having sworn an oath to defend the country from all threats both foreign and domestic, January 6<sup>th</sup> had a particularly powerful impact on Charlie. The refusal to condemn Trump was an act Charlie felt to be unforgivable.

With both his conservative and moral habits deeply rooted in the traditions outlined in the Constitution, the actions of the Republican Party on and after January 6<sup>th</sup> were in direct contradiction to his very self. During our time speaking after January 6<sup>th</sup>, it was the first time that he explicitly mentioned to me that he was considering a change in voter registration,

I am ready to drop my Republican affiliation completely. 244 years we've been a leader in the world and now one FUCKING CLOWN tears it apart. And what I really don't understand is how the Republican Party, a party which I belonged to for too long, got behind Trump.

January 6<sup>th</sup> left Charlie in a state of total abandonment, separated not only from members of his community but from the party label he had been holding onto. It was one of the first times that he truly questioned what it meant to call himself a Republican in the post-

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<sup>24</sup> Like members of the armed forces members of congress are required to take the following oath: “I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter: So help me God.” (Senate.gov)

Trump era. As he later said to me, “What has happened here? This is supposed to be my party. The party of people who care about the country, who care about the Constitution, who care about our infrastructure...I don’t know a conservative that cares anything about people other than themselves.” Despite his feelings of loyalty to his Republican and conservative self, Charlie finds himself being forced out of a party that he believed himself to be a part of. However, without a suitable alternative, Charlie feels trapped, unable to align with the “liberals” or the “left.” Caught between two warring parties all he sees is division, hate, and the ever-growing possibility of civil war.

***Gale***

Gale (63) was one of several individuals that had already left the Republican Party when Trump ran for office in 2016. Leading up to 2020, Gale did not harbour strong feelings of attachment towards either party but when presented with a choice between the two parties, felt that her values often aligned more closely with the Republican Party. Sitting on her couch with her laptop in front of her, Gale told me about her memories growing up in a strictly Republican household in Virginia. She explained how from a young age this environment fostered an almost primordial attachment to the Republican Party that stayed with her for much of her young adult life. Gale started to drift away from the party in 2010, six years before Trump emerged as leader of the Republican Party. Reflecting on her choice to exit, and the attachment her parents felt towards the party, she explained that it was “A completely different era, different time, different party” and that “I am not sure my parents would recognize the party now.” While Gale’s exit predated Trump, the patterns of behaviours that prompted her exit were the same

patterns that would end up helping Trump to rise to prominence in 2016. Chief among them was the increased prominence of social conservatism within the Republican Party. Gale explained that her prior attachment to the Republican Party stemmed from her fiscally conservative nature particularly regarding the national debt and government spending. However, she also explained that she was “off the scale liberal” when it comes to social issues like abortion, LGBTQ2S+ rights etc.

Thus, like so many others, Gale’s exit from the Republican Party came about because of the rise in social conservatism within the Republican Party. She explained that she remembers there being small pockets of social conservative extremism as far back as Reagan. While she recognized their presences, she always felt as though they were a vocal minority and that the primary focus of the Republican Party remained on fiscal issues. As she told me,

In my experience, it was a big tent party. You know, I have always been pro-choice. I don't care who you love, and people ought to, you know, have there should be equal rights for all and the government has absolutely no business telling me who I can and cannot marry. Everybody else should enjoy the same. And that’s how it was at a time. It was about limiting government interaction in our daily lives. And so, what I saw happen over the you know the last decade and then some is this slow erosion, this creeping in of this Evangelicalism. This idea of compromise getting a bad word.

As social conservatism began to dominate the Republican Party, Gale and many others found themselves a victim of two conflicting traditions that were brought together by a political hegemony that stacked social and political identities together<sup>25</sup>. This further

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<sup>25</sup> See Ezra Klein as cited by Dimock and Wike (2020).

fostered an environment in which one's fiscal values are pitted against religious and social morals, collapsing the boundaries between the social and the political. With many of these social issues evoking the strongest emotional reaction from members, it further discouraged compromise between the two parties. The result being that individuals like Gale were presented with an irreparable contradiction. That contradiction being a political party whose platform advocates for limited government in order to protect the rights and freedoms of individuals, while simultaneously seeking to extend government restrictions that limit the rights of individuals deemed undesirable and/or nonconforming to American Christian values. Recognizing this shift back in 2010, Gale found herself being driven away from the party despite her more fiscally conservative nature.

The next time that I spoke with Gale was a few days after the first presidential debate between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. During the debate, the world witnessed a complete breakdown of traditional debate decorum. NPR post-debate analysts referred to it as “maybe the worst presidential debate in American history” (Montanaro, 2020). Throughout the entire debate, Donald Trump bullied, spoke over, and interrupted both his opponent and debate moderator Chris Wallace. Speaking to Gale about the state of the Republican Party and her thoughts on the debate, she told me that,

One of the things I was thinking and in lieu of our conversation today and having seen the debate that one of the things that I've seen happen within the Republican Party is the Nationalists, the Right, the Social Conservatives, the Tea Partiers started bringing these, you know, nationalist, religious ideas and for the rest of us that have been here for a long time, all of a sudden are called

RINOs. And looking back on it, that's exactly what they did, they came in and they bullied their way into taking over the party.

Trump's behaviour during the debate reflected a pattern of behaviours amongst increasingly vocal subsets of the Republican Party. It reflected the breakdown of social and political civility caused by decades of hostile and defensive rhetoric. As spokesperson for the Republican Party and American conservatism, Trump embraced the behaviours and rhetoric that Buckley fought to exclude from American conservatism. Given a platform upon which to speak, these groups have since pushed their way into the party replacing the traditionalism and fiscal conservative values that had anchored individuals like Gale to the Republican Party.

By the end of our conversations, Gale had firmly expressed her desire to see the rhetoric of the far-right removed from the Republican Party. However, like so many others she explained that the rights and freedoms of these individuals to express themselves supersedes her own desires. Seeing no solution to ongoing issues like abortion, gun violence, and political division, Gale found herself wondering whether the United States will be able to sustain its current two-party system. Fearing for the survival of American democracy, Gale spoke in detail about her desire to see improvements to American political education. Believing that lack of political awareness is at the heart of many of the issues mentioned above, Gale sees the solution not in government but civic engagement. Merging the conservative mindset of limited government, with collectivist rhetoric so often denounced by conservatism, Gale seeks a balance of ideas rejecting the black or white approach that so often dominates political rhetoric in the United States.



*Caitlin*

I met Caitlin a few days before the 2020 election. Caitlin (59) was born in Florida where she currently lives with her wife and dog. Caitlin grew up in a very conservative Southern Baptist family with strong social conservative values. When asked about her political background, she explained that she has always felt “stuck in the middle” and never felt like she truly belonged to either political party. Prior to 2000, Caitlin was registered with the Democrat Party. However, she felt that her voice was muted by Florida’s closed primary voting system. After watching a Republican candidate win a local election despite having been convicted of prostitution twice, Caitlin realized that if she wanted her voice to carry any political sway, she needed to be able to vote against individuals like this. As she stated, “I knew if I was ever going to have any kind of voice in this county, I had to be Republican.” Like Charlie, Caitlin lives in a very conservative community and thus has little voice as a member of the opposition party. Motivated by the desire to have her voice heard, she registered with the Republican Party in 2001. Although she held onto her Republican registration until after the 2020 election, she refrained from identifying with a Trump led Republican Party by labelling herself a RINO.

Caitlin explained that the affinity she felt for the Republican Party was caused by her fiscal conservative habits. As she stated, “I’m all about business. I love business. I like not over encumbering our businesses with regulation, which is something that Trump was really working on, but he went a little overboard.” Like many others that I spoke with, the idealized image of conservatism as presented by individuals, like Meyer, conjured a

vision of limited government regulation and a free market economy. Further, Caitlin explained that she seeks economic policies that help to address the United States ever growing financial deficit. While she recognizes the need for programs like Medicare and Social Security, she desires a society in which individuals are primarily self-reliant rather than one that depends on government handouts. However, the current actions of the Republican Party starkly oppose the principles which she sees as fundamental to American conservatism.

Principle among these is the Republican Party's stance on issues like marriage and abortion. Speaking to some of these, Caitlin explained that,

They are trying to legislate their conservative principles into law to make everyone abide by and live by their rules which is actually anti-conservative. It's not conservative at all whenever you're trying to legislate government into a bigger role than they should have... They've now become this mix of Christian conservatives that want to mandate how people live and what they believe.

Russel Kirk, founder of American conservatism and devout Christian warned of the dangers of religious extremism citing that “Christian activists” were capable of the same “libido dominandi” as any other secular movement (Russello, 2004). While the prospect of extensive government legislation motivated by religious views remains unappealing for many individuals, for Caitlin it is also the source of an identity crisis. Like many others, Caitlin feels that the social conservative platform of the Republican Party infringes on the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. However, her status as a member of the LGBTQ2S+ community creates an additional source of tension. As she explained, “I was married in 2018 and that's sort of difficult to be in the same box between the

conservative beliefs about being gay and being gay [sic]. So, whenever I say I'm conservative, I'm also liberal in a lot of respects. So, I sort of end up in the middle." As religious traditions merged with American conservatism, the parameters that defined who was and was not conservative narrowed leaving individuals like Caitlin caught between two conflicting ideologies.

As previously addressed in Chapter Three, the merging of religious ideology with political groups created what Mason (2018) identified as a type of "mega identity." These "mega identities" compile multiple social, ethnic, racial, and religious identities into a single political identity. For someone like Caitlin, whose sexual orientation contrasts the conservative prototype imagined by members within groups like the Religious Right, they are left feeling trapped in a type of identity paradox. This paradox has been created by the merging of the conservative traditions of the Kirk and Buckley era with the Religious Right. Caitlin is conservative as defined by what one considers fiscally conservative. However, she is not conservative under the definition provided by the socially conservative Religious Right.

With Caitlin's conservative self under constant attack, she finds herself forcibly ousted from her social and political community. Speaking to the lasting impact of violence within communities in India, Veena Das argues that "community is constituted through agreements and hence can also be torn by refusal to acknowledge some parts of community as an integral part of it" (2006, pg. 9). Bound by her economic and fiscal beliefs, Caitlin believes herself to be an integral part of American conservatism. However, her refusal to conform to the standards set by religious and socially

conservative members of her community prevents her from being accepted. While this form of collective violence was present in her life prior to Trump, she explained that over the past four years it has gotten increasingly worse. Citing heated debates with friends and family, she explained how most of them now question her loyalty to the Republican Party. Others have ceased all contact with her or refuse to do business with her once they found out she is gay. Seeking to combat this sense of political and social isolation, Caitlin created a Facebook for former Republicans and Democrats to come together. As the group grew in popularity, someone within the group posted her voter registration and address online. This caused her to be increasingly targeted by hate speech, and personal threats online. As she told me, “People have personally messaged me and said, you know, they know where I live. You better watch what you're doing.” Fearing for her safety, she decided to buy a guard dog for her property.

Faced with such hostility, I asked her why she continued to hold onto her status as a RINO. She explained that by labelling herself a Republican, she finds that she is granted additional credibility when talking with her fellow conservatives. As she told me, “This past four years I guess I just sort of stayed Republican because it was easier to fight with people. When they call me a liberal demon and all that crap, I just say I'm a registered Republican. And that usually makes them hesitate. So, it gave me a little more standing.” By invoking her Republican status, Caitlin was granted an audience with other members of her group that she feels would have otherwise dismissed her as the political other. The purposeful invocation of her Republican membership became a tool used to counter the stigma assigned to her other social identities. As McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton (2020)

noted, the language of Trump fostered an environment in which the political “other” was not worthy of attention until they changed. In such a hostile environment, the power of one’s voice is greatly diminished unless they are seen as a member of the same group. While Caitlin abandoned her membership in early 2021, she continues to rely on her fiscal conservative nature to form new bonds with other former members of the Republican Party.

***Ray***

When I first spoke to Ray (65) in October of 2020, he was living in Massachusetts with his wife. At the time he was preparing to move into a new house that they had purchased in Florida. Ray does not strongly identify with either of the two political parties, preferring to see himself as a “middle of the road independent.” He feels that his unaffiliated status grants him additional clarity and provides him with a greater sense of agency during each election cycle. Diving into Ray’s life history, his independent status follows other similar trends that I observed with several other interlocutors. As with many others, Ray constructs his political identity by invoking comparisons with those that surround him.

Ray went to college in Upstate New York, an area that is a historically conservative part of the country. At the time he recalls feeling “pretty darn liberal” in comparison to the hard-line conservative views held by members of that community. After he finished college, he took a job in Massachusetts as a software engineer. At that time, he remembers thinking that “I wasn't even close to what liberal was because it's so predominant there to the point where a lot of people are pretty extreme in their left-wing

ideologies.” The formation of Ray’s political identity relies not only on Ray’s sense of self, but his relationship to those around him by way of comparison. Using what he saw in this new political environment, Ray established himself as belonging to a more conservative social group when confronted with what he labelled as left-wing ideologies. As he prepares to move to Florida, he feels as though he will once again be labelled a liberal by members of his new community. The state of liminality created by a constantly shifting political culture fostered an environment in which adopting an independent status permits a higher degree of flexibility and stability. For someone like Ray, being unaffiliated permits a higher degree of freedom as he works to adapt to new political environments.

Despite this, Ray admitted that during election years, he typically feels the closest connection to the Republican Party. He stated that he had not voted for a Democratic candidate since 1976 when Jimmy Carter ran for office. When asked why, he told me, “I tend to vote Republican primarily due to what it means for my wallet. I guess I qualify as socially liberal and fiscally conservative and most of the time fiscally conservative wins.” Like many Americans, Ray routinely finds himself caught between two of the three pillars of American conservatism. These being the fiscal and social arms of the Republican Party, which have since merged to form a single imagined community comprised of several distinct ideals and values. It forces individuals like Ray to prioritize that which most closely follows his own “moral vocabulary” (Bellah et al., 1985, pg. 20), thereby aligning himself politically with those following a separate conservative tradition than his own.

During the 2016 election cycle, Ray noted that he did not feel strongly enough about the current political and cultural context to vote against Donald Trump. Although he found Trump to be both ethically flawed and lacking the fiscal responsibility he looks for in a presidential candidate, he saw the Republican Party as still aligning with his fiscal values. Further, he felt equal disdain for Hillary Clinton and the economic platform of the Democratic Party. In doing so, he felt that he had fulfilled his obligation to participate in the democratic process without compromising his values by voting for the Democratic or Republican candidates. Despite this, Ray recognized that by voting for neither of the two candidates, his vote did not carry any power in the 2016 election. While at the time this did not bother him, the 2020 election would prove different.

However, it was not just Trump's character that bothered him. Ray remembers feeling frustrated by the all or nothing politics that had normalized within the Republican Party's rhetoric. Much of this he attributes to the rise of partisan media that has contributed to the formation of partisan media bubbles that reinforce real or imagined differences and thus fostering distrust and hostility towards the other (Levendusky, 2013). As he told me, "There really is no negotiation on budgets and so forth. That's the disappointing part. And I don't know...I trace a lot of it back to Fox News kind of polluting the minds of people. And I say CNN is kind of the other side." Like so many I spoke with, Ray desires balance and a political environment in which discussion between the two parties is encouraged rather than the all or nothing rhetoric he sees currently. For the first few years that Trump was president, Ray sought to escape this cycle of violence and hostility by largely refraining from engaging in political discussions. However, this

passivity shifted on March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020, after Trump made his national statement from the Oval Office addressing the evolving Covid 19 pandemic. After hearing Trump's speech, Ray remembers thinking,

This guy doesn't have a clue how he's going to deal with it. And it's like you know if Franklin Roosevelt had done something like that, after Pearl Harbor when he made his speech to reassure the country and so I just came away saying, wow this guy doesn't know what he's doing. And that just pissed me off!

Seeing Trump's lack of leadership and the danger it posed to the nation, Ray felt compelled to speak out. This not only involved voicing feeling discontent, but also vocally engaging with Trump supporters on social media. However, he explained that in almost every instance, these politically charged discussions resulted in a complete breakdown of civility as he grew increasingly frustrated. As he later admitted, "I stayed out of this stuff early on. But now I'm just a jerk on Facebook. And so be it. You know, it's hard not to be [sic] just the ridiculousness of it all. And then once this is over, I hope to disconnect from it." Frustrated by misinformation, and Trump's response to the pandemic, Ray found it increasingly difficult to remain civil online. In his mind, Trump not only lacked moral and fiscal values, but also was a threat to the United States of America.

The last time that we spoke Ray told me that he plans to vote Democrat for as long as the Republican Party continues the patterns of behaviours Trump brought to the White House. Should he see the Republican Party returning to a pre-Trump era, he explained that he will likely go back to voting with his wallet but does not believe that this shift will occur anytime soon.



*Frank*

Frank was born in Alabama and spent most of his childhood in Pennsylvania. Growing up he recalls it being a “blue collar steel town” before loss of jobs and rise in opioid addiction changed the overall quality of life for many who lived there. As companies began shifting overseas, many of these factory towns saw a sharp decline in jobs. As noted, during his 2016 campaign, Trump pledged to bring back American industry jobs. It was a message that resonated with predominantly white working-class voters who felt as though their voices had been silenced by an ever forward moving economy. Having witnessed firsthand the consequences of deindustrialization, Frank told me that, “I could see how people like my family easily transition to Trump. You know, kind of selling them a bill of goods that the steel industry was going to come back. It’s not. It’s gone, never coming back.” At the age of 18 Frank moved to North Carolina to attend Appalachian State University. Surrounded by a predominantly liberal population, Frank decided to join the Young Republicans, a nation-wide organization for members of the Republican Party between the ages of 18 and 40.

Frank remained with the Republican Party until the start of the Iraq War in 2003. Although initially supportive, he found himself being pushed away by increased use of misinformation to garner support for the war. Since then, rather than voting along party lines, Frank explained that he takes the time to research every person on the ballot prior to casting his vote. This not only includes presidential candidates but also extends to judges, and other members of congress at both a state and federal level. He told me that he

usually finds one or two people from each party that he agrees with thus allowing him to balance his vote between conservative and liberal policies.

In the months leading up to the 2020 election, Frank began researching each of the candidates. Having witnessed the damage that Trump had done to the country, Frank explained that despite his more conservative nature, he was, “For the first time ever, I'm voting like well, straight ticket Democratic.” When Trump hijacked the Republican Party, he demanded absolute loyalty from members of his party. Anyone who spoke out against him was swiftly denounced. Prominent examples being Lisa Murkowski and Mitt Romney,<sup>26</sup> both of whom voted to impeach Trump following January 6<sup>th</sup> and have since been subject to verbal attacks from Trump and his followers online. Recognizing the hold that Trump had over the party, Frank explained that he saw the need to expunge members of the Republican Party from office.

Frank further explained that he has always been a student of history, a passion that I saw evidence of when he would pause mid-thought to look up a date or fact pertinent to our current topic of conversation. Looking at Trump in this manner, Frank attributes the patterns of behaviours he sees coming from Trump to the likes of Newt Gingrich in the 1990s. As previously discussed, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich strongly encouraged the use of hostile rhetoric during his tenure as speaker. He helped to normalize the demonization of political opponents thereby breaking long standing traditions of civility and bipartisanship within the House of Representatives. As Frank

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<sup>26</sup> Mitt Romney also voted to convict Trump during his first impeachment, becoming the first senator to vote in favour of removing a president of the same party from office.

recalled hearing, “Don't refer to Democrats as my opposition refer to them as scum. Refer to them as evil. You know, it's basically like burning all bridges take no prisoners type. Those two things combined kind of eroded my trust.” Frustrated and disturbed by the lack of civility that impeded progression towards the common good (see Reich, 2018), Frank felt that the polarizing language of high-ranking members of the party contrasted his own humanist morals and values.

As this all or nothing rhetorical swept through the party leadership, it helped to set a precedent for rank-and-file members to follow. As Frank further explained,

And then when I saw how Obama was treated not by the national media because I think he was treated pretty fairly [sic] for the most part, you know, but by people that I knew in North Carolina...[T]here's a lot of people that when things get a little bit agitated, like the N word comes out now. And I was like, you know, these aren't my people.

As McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton (2020) observed, Trump's rhetoric relied on a political environment in which political opponents are completely and utterly wrong. As members of opposing political factions, they neither desire nor require respect or consideration. Recognizing the damage this language was having on the nation, Frank realized that the values and ideals he attributed to conservative thought were absent from the Republican Party. As he noted, “It's a party that doesn't really have a platform anymore. It's just power for power's sake. And the way to justify that is fear tactics and conspiracy theories.” With the Republican Party lacking a coherent political platform and its members embracing language and behaviours counterproductive to working towards

that common good, Frank felt that he was forced to separate himself from the party calling themselves conservatives.

Trapped within a system that associates conservative with the Republican Party, Frank, like many I spoke to, struggles to identify with either of the two dominant parties. As noted, Frank finds his political and moral values no longer aligning with the brand of conservative politics currently coming from the Republican Party. However, when presented with the choice between conservative and liberal, Frank stated that he always preferred to think of himself as a conservative with humanist values. When asked how he defined conservatism, he compared it to a mental state of being in which one understands that rights and freedoms are “difficult to achieve but easy to lose.” For this reason, democratic institutions like the United States must be protected and guarded against sudden changes that threaten to disrupt social and political norms. While documents like the Constitution have provided individuals the opportunity to shape their own lives, individuals must be able to pursue them. For this reason, he continues to struggle with the language of social conservatism and the religious right. Labelling himself as an “old-fashioned Republican,” Frank has always felt strongly about the necessity for a separation between Church and State. However, with the biblical being an inherent part of American culture (Bellah et al., 1985) there exists an underlying paradox that has been further emphasized by the Republican Party’s embrace of religious doctrine as justification for its position on social issues.

In addition to religious doctrine, Frank feels that the Republican Party has become dependent on conspiracy theories and fear tactics rather than a coherent political platform.

Rather than a party that acts as a healthy counterbalance to Democrats' liberal policies, Frank sees an increasingly authoritarian government whose arrival was only hastened by Donald Trump. The fear of losing the democratic values that Frank sees as part of the American identity is yet another reason why he feels that his conservative self is incompatible with that of the current Republican Party. Echoing the words of Walter whose experience speaking with his fellow conservatives was quoted in Chapter Three, Frank described a similar feeling that the freedoms won are just as easily lost if no resistance is given. It was with this principle in mind that Buckley wrote the mission statement of *National Review*, and it is what drew Frank towards conservative ideals as a young teenager. As he explained to me, "That's probably why I spent most of my life in the conservative camp. Because I do kind of drift more towards that in my life. I'm more cautious with things." While Frank's ability to sympathize with the fear of change has granted him some degree of understanding, the overall abandonment of ethical civility previously cited has hindered any attempt to find common ground with the more conservative members of his community. As such, Frank remains an outsider to many members of his community.

***By way of concluding***

Regardless of their current political affiliation each of the individuals discussed in these past two chapters are bound together by a common idea. This idea being that the Republican Party and its image of conservatism is far removed from that which they once called their own. Trumpism proved to be a break in the "ordinary," bringing to the forefront of political discourse the extraordinary which until recently had been shrouded

behind familiar patterns and behaviours. Trump underscored extremism that had been building within the American conservative movement for decades. His actions forced thousands of Americans to question their political identities and loyalty to the Republican Party (Corasaniti et al., 2001). While many sought to escape the confines of the binary political system by voting for a third-party candidate during the 2016 election, the lack of “voice” that their vote carried prevented any real chance of influencing the outcome of the 2016 election. Faced with the possibility of another four years of Trump as president, individuals like Ray and Charlie found the Democratic Party to be the only means of achieving their goal of removing Trump. As it became clear that Trump's influence was not leaving the Republican Party, even loyal members like Mary fell away from the Party. Even individuals who had held onto their political affiliation as a habitual placeholder now sought to escape the stigma associated with the Republican Party. No longer was the Republican label a source of comfort and familiarity, it was now part of a spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963/2014).

As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, forced out of the party, each of my interlocutors were thrust into a situation not of their choosing but “within which they must make their history” (Asad, 1987, pg. 607). While individuals like Mary felt welcomed into their new political community, others continue to struggle to align themselves with the liberal prototype constructed by the Democratic Party. Some have found a sense of comfort in their newfound unaffiliated status. Walking the line between Democrat and Republican, individuals like Harry or Ray find liberation in casting aside their party membership. Still, unable or unwilling to fully align their political identity

with either the Right or the Left, many are left wandering and homeless caught in a war between increasingly hostile communities. Faced with such hostility, many found themselves increasingly isolated as social and political norms were abandoned in favour of an all or nothing approach. In these cases, individuals become trapped in a zone of political abandonment.

I use zones of abandonment not in the literal sense as for example Biehl (2005) and others have. In these instances, the zones of abandonment occupied by individuals like Gale etc. are akin to the imagined communities that define the two dominant political parties. Yet these parties have abandoned the moderate and independent voter now trapped between two equally undesirable choices. Unable to reconcile with either side, some began to question the durability of American democracy itself. As the following chapter will discuss, the lack of discourse and growing hostility between the two parties generates an increasing feeling of isolation and uncertainty as many of my interlocutors find themselves rejecting the historically binary choice presented to them. As the past two chapters highlighted, in most cases my interlocutors do not feel that they have changed. While some find themselves agreeing with the political platforms of the Democratic left, none voiced an abandonment of their conservative values. What has changed is the core meaning of American conservatism.

## Chapter Six

### The State of The Union

*I'm ashamed of where we are as a country. And so, [...] it's kind of this duality of [sic] recognizing that there are things wrong. But that doesn't mean that you just, you know, scrap it or whatever. Like it's something I want to be a part of improving and changing.*

– Anonymous

Considering the above-mentioned words, how do we as a nation begin to move forward in the post-Trump world? With the current political climate strained by hostile rhetoric and partisanship, few interlocutors saw productive outlets for the types of discourse necessary for the continuation of American democracy. In light of their recent exit from the Republican Party, many now faced a near total disruption of their social and political circles. In some cases, my interlocutors found themselves unable to engage in political discourse with their friends and colleagues. At worst, they were met with hostility even by their immediate family members. In what has become a vicious cycle of ritualized political performances, attacks, and violence, polarization now threatens the very heart of American democracy. As Ezra Klein pragmatically states, “polarization begets polarization” (Klein, 2020, pg. 25). Ever since individuals like Newt Gingrich normalized the demonizing of one’s political opponents, the civility and compromise that allowed the “middle of the road” conservative to co-exist within the Republican Party has slowly abated, leaving only an all or nothing mentality.

As previously alluded to, each interlocutor’s exit from the Republican Party was not only caused by Trump, but also by the all or nothing mentality that had become normalized amongst rank-and-file members of the Republican Party. As their former



Republican allies refused any deviation from the path set forth by Trump, my interlocutors found themselves being pushed further and further away from their respective political communities. In some cases, this push resulted in a total realignment of political identity as they found themselves absorbed into the Democratic Party. As individuals like Mary demonstrated, this absorption was only made possible through reciprocity, a willingness to embrace one's former opponent in the hopes of defeating a common enemy (i.e., Trump), and achieving progress. Others found themselves trapped between two parties neither of which matched their internally constructed conservative prototype. For some, the perceived differences of the political other's prototypical image proved too great of a change to support a total shift in group membership. Although each found enough commonality through the desire to defeat the extremism of Trump, these similarities were still outweighed by contrasting political ideologies that now threaten the survival of American democracy itself.

With Americans increasingly believing that they are in a competition against a progressively more hostile group of outsiders, there is an increased tendency to exaggerate perceived differences between the two groups (Ahler and Sood, 2016). Liberals become labelled as socialist "woke" individuals intent on destroying American family values. Conservatives are labelled racist, homophobic/transphobic, religious extremists who only care about themselves. Identities become built on labels and stereotypes<sup>27</sup> that divide the nation and threaten democratic institutions. Furthermore,

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<sup>27</sup> Harry was one of several individuals who spoke extensively about what he called "problematic and dangerous" stereotyping, pointing out how he sees conservative, and liberals being labelled by news organizations and popular culture.

they act as a barrier excluding the politically minded centrist who desires balance between the two political extremes. While many saw fault with both the far-right and far-left ends of the political spectrum, the explicit endorsement of these behaviours at an institutional level within the Republican Party allowed many ex-Republicans/former Republicans to merge their political identity with the newly inviting Democratic Left.

Although competition is to be expected given that the behaviours associated with the American presidential sociodrama naturally lend themselves to the type of bias and prejudice that greatly reduces inter-group interactions (see Tajfel and Turner, 1979), the scale of division and conflict that Trumpism brought forth has grown to such a degree that it now threatens American democratic institutions in addition to my interlocutors' own political identity. The presence of this new existential crisis created opportunities for the type of cross-cutting necessary for mitigating inter-group conflict (see Ross, 1920/2015). Social groups previously divided by political or ideological differences now became part of an increasingly overlapping group whose primary goal was to remove Trump from office. This common goal helped to stabilize the natural division created by the two distinct groups and has provided new opportunities for the progression of social and political discourse, including that which guided my own conversations with these individuals. In contrast to Trumpism, the moderate, if given the opportunity, could engage with political issues that were no longer strictly a question of morality. Despite this, the unwavering hostility and commitment to Donald Trump proved a stark reminder of the challenges and limitations one faces when attempting to engage with an opponent who remains so far to one side of the political spectrum that they remain completely and

totally unwilling to consider any position that does not align with their own social and political imaginary.

Sally's journey out of the Republican party, as discussed in Chapter Four, highlights the devastating effect of rigid political binaries. Given her longstanding membership to the Republican party and proximity to a highly conservative population, I had asked her whether she still has friends or family that support Donald Trump. She told me that she did and has struggled to maintain a relationship with them over the past few years, “The hardcore Trump supporters are just, totally impervious to persuasion” and that “It’s just frustrating to have any sort of conversation with them.” I asked Sally if she could provide me with an example of such an encounter. She went on to tell me about her own experience with her family and an ongoing conflict that arose in response to her decision to part with the Republican party.

The event in question began back in Spring of 2020. Following what she referred to as her “political awakening” and subsequent shift in political alignment, Sally chose to become more involved politically because she believed Donald Trump to be a threat to “our democracy” and felt that she “had to say something.” She submitted a video to a Facebook group called “Republicans Against Trump” in which she explained why she would not be voting for Trump in 2020. In the video she notes that despite being a “pro-life” conservative, she believed Trump posed too great a threat for her to remain with the Republican Party over a single issue like abortion. As she told me, “What I said was because of the importance of the election I couldn't be a one issue voter and that I’m still pro-life [but] I just had to vote for a Democrat.” Pulled towards the Democratic Party by

the threat she believed Trump posed to the greater good, Sally announced that she would be voting against Trump. Using her own positionality within the pro-life community, Sally hoped that her voice would carry additional power and inspire other pro-life conservatives to vote against Trump in the 2020 election. She further explained that she deliberately phrased her message in such a way that she stressed that she believed being pro-life meant committing oneself to protecting **all** life and not just those still in utero. Her message denounced meant denouncing the racist and nativist behaviours she saw coming from Trump and the Republican Party. More importantly, she felt it was necessary to work together to end the global pandemic that had claimed the lives of millions.

After a few months her video had received enough attention online that it led to a follow up opt-ed and several media appearances. Eventually, it caught the attention of her youngest son and daughter-in-law. As she explained,

And then one day my daughter [in-law], my younger son's wife popped on [Facebook] and attacked me about the whole pro-life issue, which was ironic because I'm still pro-life. And she took offence at the Republican Voters Against Trump video that I had posted. The video was an evangelical woman, a pro-life evangelical woman explaining why she [sic] couldn't vote for Trump. And my daughter [in-law] was very obnoxious... So, the next day I called my son that [is] married to her. I said, "Do you know what's going on?" And he started screaming at me over the phone. And I could not literally get a word in edgewise. So, I, you know, after a few minutes, I just finally just hung up...and I haven't heard from him since.

The initial incident between Sally and her daughter-in-law occurred in September 2020. Each time we spoke, I inquired about her son and whether the situation had improved.

When I last spoke to her in February 2022, she tearfully informed me that things had still not changed:

Sally: Nothing has changed with my son.

Kyle: Really? So he has still not spoken to you? Have you tried to reach out to him or...?

Sally: Just yeah nothing. So I finally decided [last Fall] it just got so painful I can't... I'm sitting here, trying to figure out what to give his kids for Christmas and I have no idea. I haven't seen them or talk[ed] to them for so long. I don't know what they like. I don't know. You know...the whole situation [is] so painful that I just finally had to say, I've got to stop. If you want, you know, a relationship, you change your mind you want a relationship with me, [sic] I would be delighted to have that, but you know, I just, I just don't, I just don't get it. I don't know. [sic] It's so stupid...

Whenever one is talking about political identity, one also touches on issues such as race and religion (Mason, 2018). Sally's experience emphasizes the consequence of religious identity merging with political identity. It created the assumption that by abandoning Trump and the Republican Party, Sally has also rejected her religious and moral values. Because of this, Sally's daughter-in-law and son chose to cut off all relations with her. Under such rigid political binaries, supporting the political opposition becomes an impossibility regardless of whether a person still aligns with the pro-life platform of the Republican Party. While Sally maintained her status as anti-abortion/pro-life, in the eyes of those who continued to follow a hardline stance on the issue, in the eyes of her son and

daughter-in-law, her actions were considered a direct violation of all that was considered morally good.

While the backlash Sally received from her son and daughter-in-law stands out as an extraordinary example, she was not the only one to experience such hostility. Vicky (63) was another person to fall victim to the all or nothing mentality of Trump's supporters. Vicky currently lives in Florida and is at present unaffiliated with either party. Referring to herself as "politically ignorant," she explained that she tends to vote her conscience rather than along party lines. She explained that she tries to vote for the person that she finds to be the most honest in each election. While she never liked Trump, she recalled her disgust with the way Obama was treated by members of the Right. For this reason, she decided to give Trump the benefit of the doubt leading up to the 2016 election. As she explained,

After the crap that went on with President Obama and watching how nobody gave him a chance, it was all or nothing. I wanted to at least try to give Trump a chance and give him the benefit of the doubt that he might surround himself with people who were capable of running the government.

As the 2016 election drew closer, Vicky remembers thinking that she did not see any indication that Trump would rise to the occasion as leader of the United States. When it was announced that he had won the presidency in 2016, she recalls feeling extremely disappointed and depressed. Coincidentally, the results of the election also happened to be announced on the day of her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. This would ultimately lead to an incident between her and her brother which she recounted to me,

On my 60th birthday, milestone birthday you know, my brother called me. My baby brother, and he says, “How you doing?” I figured he's calling me about my birthday and I said, “Ah, I’m depressed.” And he says, “Why are you depressed?” I said, “Because Trump got elected.” Whoa! That was it. He pounced on me over the phone. I think if he could have come through the phone, he would have. And, you know, I wound up... I got off the phone crying, and I said to him, “You know what, Steve, if these are the last words you ever hear out of my mouth, I love you but I'm hanging up on you. Goodbye.” And I just hung up. I just was like, oh my God!

It was rhetoric such as this that ultimately proved to be a decisive force in determining my interlocutor’s relationships both with the Republican Party and their fellow community members. In the end, Vicky joined countless others (see Pinsker, 2021) in cutting these individuals out of her life and limited all political discussion to avoid further confrontation. This pattern of social behavior results not only in the isolation of centrist Republicans but also restricts cross party discourse and threatens democratic cooperation.

Reflecting on the choice to isolate herself from known members of the Republican Party, Vicky explained that although her lack of political knowledge had stopped her from engaging in complex debates, she had always felt that her unaffiliated status afforded her a greater degree of freedom when speaking with members from either party. As previously discussed, political relationships are heavily dictated by loyalty and party membership. Individuals identified as a member of the opposition are frequently blocked from engaging in open dialogue. Prior to Trump, Vicky felt comfortable engaging in political dialogue with both Democrats and Republicans due to her presumed neutral status. With the all or nothing rhetoric that has since come to define the Trump

presidency, Vicky felt that this freedom has been stripped away had been leaving her feeling alienated, hopeless, and isolated. As a result, it has left individuals like Vicky to question where, they belong within a system which forces a person to choose between one side or another.

While Vicky was able to prevent herself from engaging with members of the Trump-led Republican Party, this option was not always available particularly for those living in strong conservative communities. For someone like Charlie, escape remained unavailable due to his proximity to some of the most extreme sects of the Republican Party.<sup>28</sup> These individuals remain trapped in communities that have grown increasingly hostile towards anyone not loyal to Trump. The hostilities were so extreme that many felt that the United States was on the brink of civil war. So great was this fear that after January 6<sup>th</sup>, Charlie told me that he had stocked up on ammunition, supplies, and fuel in case he was attacked.<sup>29</sup> As he told me in the week following the attack, “I said a while back that I thought we were on the brink of civil war and what do we see now? The Capitol attacked, brother fighting against brother. So yeah, my military training is kicking in now.” While Charlie’s military background prompted a far more defensive response, he was not the only one to take action to defend himself. Speaking to Laura after the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection, she admitted that she reported her long-time neighbour to the FBI

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<sup>28</sup> Speaking to Charlie in March 2023, he informed me that one of his lifelong friends had moved to a new state because he could no longer handle the hostilities and hate festering in his community.

<sup>29</sup> Charlie explained that the violence and hostility he saw was a consistent trigger for his PTSD. This trigger often served as motivation for his defensive response to shifting political situations.



after learning about his involvement at the event. While the social bonds of community she shared weighed on her moral conscience when deciding whether to oust a member of her community, the necessity to protect herself and American democracy against those seeking to dismantle it outweighed any feelings of loyalty she felt towards this individual.

In many cases, the decision to act either against Trump or their fellow neighbours was ultimately dictated by the notion that the Republican Party under Trump had become the embodiment of evil. It was a tone that shifted starkly from an era they remember in which compromise and civility was possible and a person could identify as a conservative Democrat or liberal Republican<sup>30</sup>. Reflecting on how things have changed, Caitlin explained that,

Well, I think that in the past it hasn't been that clearly defined, because there were good things about the Republican Party, and there are good things about the Democratic Party in their positions. [There were things] I liked on the conservative side and things I believed in on the liberal side. But after January 6 and with Trump coming along and taking over the party, that's where the clarity came for me it's just like I can't stand for any of that...And then you look at the other people, and even the people that I know that are Republicans, and it was like I don't see them doing the same thing. I don't see them caring about really anything except themselves and that's when it became very, very clear it's like...it's now right and wrong, good and evil until Trump goes away and they get back to governing by the people for the people. To me that's, again, just right and wrong.

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<sup>30</sup>Mike was one such individual who deeply lamented the loss of freedom to exist outside of the realm of black and white labels.

For individuals like Caitlin, Trump was an exercise in selective memory. As Hall and Lindholm (1999) note, most presidents and elective officials have been able to pass with what they refer to as minimal morals. If a person is considered susceptible to human flaws, then their faults, however egregious, can and will be overlooked. The collective memory of a leader past or present is thus dictated not only by their personal achievements, but also by what society is capable of, or willing to forget<sup>31</sup>.

Through selective amnesia a glorified and fictitious collective political narrative is formed which is then used to unify members under a shared past. From this shared past, heroes like Ronald Reagan emerged whose many flaws were overshadowed by carefully selected memories outlining his achievements. Trump was a rupture of the ordinary, shattering the carefully constructed narrative of a moral and just party. As many conversations with former Republicans and conservative voters highlighted, patterns of selective amnesia previously used to maintain support could not contend with Trump's often blatant disregard for what my interlocutors believed to be core conservative values. As Hall and Lindholm (1999) continue, if a president or elected official is believed to be enslaved by party politics, or special interests, or intent on overturning sacred values, then fewer Americans will be capable of forgiving or ignoring their numerous sins. As Caitlin's statement highlighted, Trump and those willing to overlook his betrayal of the sacred served as an attack on morality itself.

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<sup>31</sup> As Nietzsche reminds us, forgetting is essential to action. As he emphasized, "Even a happy life is possible without remembrance, as the beast shows; but life in any true sense is absolutely impossible without forgetfulness" (1874/1983, pg. 62).

Ultimately it was the attention that Trump brought to the slow erosion of morality and democratic norms that proved decisive in pushing my interlocutors out of the Republican Party. Backing this was the increasingly hostile rhetoric and partisan politics that had been festering for years slowly chipping away at the pillars holding together American democracy. From this came the motivation to not only work with the political other to remove Trump, but my interlocutors also sought an escape from the cycle of violence creating what many of them referred to as “unproductive behaviours.” Through the actions of prototype conservative leaders, these behaviours have become deeply entrenched within society. Governing structures such as the Senate and House openly embrace rhetoric once deemed unacceptable for use by elected officials. In doing so, these behaviours have normalized themselves within the ritualized and performative nature of the presidential sociodrama.

However, as previously mentioned, it was not only the physical realm that found itself corrupted by these so called “unproductive behaviours,” many of these behaviours started and continue to be dominant on the online realm. Harry was one of several individuals that voiced considerable frustration at the type of engagement he sees online. As he stated, “social media has become real life for a lot of people. And I saw so many trends in the first six [or] eight months of this last year on social media that were disturbing to me and unproductive.” Speaking to this issue, Gordana (2011) remarked that “virtual communities are often more real to their users than certain constructed communities from the so-called real reality” (pg. 17, cited by Hedican, 2016). Social media has allowed symbolic elements of the American sociodrama to transcend

interpersonal relationships. Sites like Twitter and Facebook now invoke feelings of attachment from members of political communities (see McLeod, 1999; Kertzer, 1988), including those separated by physical boundaries. These feelings of attachment are further strengthened by a network of online algorithms that generates images, ideas, and symbols that are specifically tailored towards reaffirming users' own confirmation bias.

However, it was not just social media that advanced the rise of Trumpism and political extremism. The 24-hour partisan news cycle was cited as a major contributing factor in the construction and reinforcement of political parties. Starting with the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, news media outlets became increasingly one sided, pushing specific narratives that openly support one political party over another. As the past two elections demonstrated, news outlets like Fox News created a haven for members of the far-right and the Republican Party to promote ideas that resonated with groups of voters (Mulloy, 2018). As members were fed a constant stream of carefully tailored information, many found themselves increasingly supportive of Trump and the web of lies he spun.

One individual who observed this transformation firsthand was Mike, a 54-year-old male living in Maryland. He explained how he had watched his parents shift from reluctantly voting for Trump as the Republican candidate in 2016 to actively and wholeheartedly defending him throughout the 2020 election season,

I remember when my parents voted for Trump they said, 'We plugged our nose and voted for [him], because he's the Republican candidate... [Now] they're, totally brainwashed by Fox News. I don't know...now they're like so extreme. And it's really frustrating. Like, it's to the point where I really don't even want to interact with my mom.

Much like social media, news outlets such as Fox News create an echo chamber (see Bail, 2022) that both amplify and solidify the opinions of an individual. Trapped in their own media bubble, an individual is consistently reinforced by information confirming their beliefs. For those living in smaller conservative communities, the overwhelming presence of these news sources drown out contrasting views and limit the scope of information available. As Sally told me, “Here in Oklahoma where I live, we don’t have things like *The New York Times* or CNN. It’s all conservative news so that’s all I read. So, I can kinda understand how people were blinded at first.” This blindness highlights the failures of news media, academics, and activists alike who have thus far isolated themselves from communities like Sally’s.

Without exposure to alternative points of view, an individual becomes trapped in a feedback loop that both blinds them to the truth and helps justify the labelling of the political other as “radical” or dangerous (see McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton, 2020). As my time spent with my interlocutors demonstrated, breaking free from this bubble requires not only exposure to alternative perspectives, but also a willingness to open oneself to the possibility of other perspectives. However, with social media creating distinctive imagined communities and unregulated cable news networks giving voice to what were once small pockets of extremism, political parties, and their members remain susceptible to whatever leader emerges next.

### **The Future of the Conservative**

With limited anthropological literature to draw upon, I relied heavily on the voices of my interlocutors to define the core ideal of American conservatism. As mentioned at the very start of this dissertation, one of the first questions asked to each of my interlocutors was “How *did* you define American conservatism prior to Trump taking office?” This question was never intended to provide a strict definition for to do so would merely add to the frustration felt by those who already feel confined by identity labels. Political labels have and always will be subject to external structural forces. However, anthropology with its focus on qualitative research methods can give a voice to those silenced by history and extremism. Despite straying from more traditional field methods, the patterns that emerged during my time in the virtual field painted a rich picture of loss, longing, and a desire to return to an era of normality.

When Edmund Burke wrote *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, he alleged that the changes brought on by the French Revolution were destroying traditional institutions of state resulting in the loss of good society (Burke, 2009). Like Burke, many I spoke with lamented the destruction of traditional institutions of governing. Years later, Kirk (2019) echoed these concerns by cautioning against sudden or rapid changes that would otherwise result in the loss of freedom and the morally good. If nothing else, Trump represented a dramatic shift in social and political norms. While the American conservative movement has expanded its definition well beyond Kirk’s original cannons of conservative thought, resistance to sudden change was a feeling shared by several interlocutors. Each rejects the changes they see coming from a Trump-led Republican

Party. Each long for a distant past free from the influence of the evangelical and far-right. They reject what they see as a loss of freedom, morality, and the common good.

Conservatism under the current Republican Party has abandoned the principles set forth by Kirk and Buckley. It has lost the respectability that *National Review* sought to maintain through its omission of ideas not conducive to its message for the American public. Even after Meyer's fusionism expanded conservatism to include the liberalism of Friedrich Hayek and the free-market economics which later defined the Reagan Era, it stopped short of embracing the type of anti-government rhetoric that now threatens true community within the United States. When first introduced, fusionism sought to protect individual freedom from government overreach and regulations. It was designed to allow free-market capitalism to thrive during a time in which Soviet collectivism was labelled the enemy of the American people. Yet this notion of limited government was balanced by the recognition of the need to work collectively towards a common goal. This means rejecting what Sally called the "draconian" libertarian values that became particularly prominent during the Covid-19 pandemic. Any action taken by government officials to protect the common good was seen as an attack on personal freedom. Whether it was a refusal to comply with public health regulations or a refusal to act in the best interest of others, the Republican Party has twisted the libertarian branch of American conservatism into something unrecognizable that now undermines the common good.

In addition to the above-mentioned components, conservatism meant approaching fiscal issues with an air of caution and prudence. It meant limiting government spending in order to minimize the economic impact on the lives of everyday citizens. It meant

allowing businesses to succeed or fail without government overreach restricting progress. However, it also meant supporting and funding infrastructure necessary for society to function. As testimony from individuals like Harry showed, fiscal conservatism appealed to the individual fighting for the mythical American Dream. For these individuals, independence from government provided a source of pride that collectivism threatened to take away. However, as Harry also demonstrated, without certain programs the system currently in place keeps an individual trapped in an endless cycle of poverty. As the Republican Party has forced conservatism to shift further and further into the realm of libertarian extremism, these programs have become associated with liberal ideology. As such, they are labelled the enemy of the conservative leaving behind the individuals who once embraced conservatism for its commitment to these ideals.

As the language and political ideology that the world has come to associate with Trump took hold, they slowly began to erode and replace the previously mentioned values that my interlocutors had come to associate with conservatism. Limited government began to be replaced by staunch libertarian movements that rejected all forms of regulations, including those designed to ensure the survival of the common good. Fiscal conservatism began to fade into the background as it was replaced by rising social conservatism that found a home in the Republican Party during the 60s and 70s. Topics like abortion, immigration, and LGBTQ2S+ overtook fiscal conservatism as the focus of the Republican Party. Under these circumstances, conservatism had shifted to something utterly unrecognizable. As Vicky emphatically stated, “I honestly don’t know anymore! I don’t know what conservative means now. I don’t know what liberal means. All I know is



that I am Christian, but I just don't know!" Frustrated by the lack of clarity, members who had found meaning in their conservative identity were forced to redefine their political imaginary to fit within this new era of politics.

Faced with the uncertainty that followed the 2020 election, each of my interlocutors remained sceptical of whether there would be a place for them within the Republican Party once Trump left office. Some questioned if it was possible for the Republican Party to return to what it was prior to Trump. While Trump's election loss offered temporary reprieve, January 6<sup>th</sup> and the subsequent impeachment proceedings removed any hope that the Republican Party could return to the pre-Trump era within the immediate future.

While individuals like Ray indicated an intention to return to "voting with [his] wallet," he stated that he refused to do so if it required him to compromise social and moral values. For Ray and others like him, the social conservatism that has come to dominate the Republican Party has reached a breaking point. Those who dislike the extremism are now in favour of prioritizing the socially progressive policies of the Democratic Party. In such a context, the Democratic Party has become more aligned with their conservative values than the Republican Party. While 'conservative' was always subjective in its definition, the parameters currently defining American conservatism leaves little room for the individual attracted to the type of conservative thinking that Buckley and others like him sought to bring to the party. While my interlocutors' image of the conservative prototype continues to exist within their political imaginary, hegemonic institutions such as the Republican Party dictates what is and is not welcomed

into the American conservative movement. Though each of my interlocutors has rejected this new, dominant brand of conservatism, the values that each labelled as part of the conservative identity remain a part of their political identity. However, it has been hijacked by the Republican Party and twisted beyond recognition. Though these interlocutors still consider themselves conservative, ultimately 'conservatism' has been co-opted to another meaning by the Republican Party, leaving them abandoned in their principles.

Therefore, what does the future hold for a conservative that rejects the conservatism of the Republican Party? This was the question that my interlocutors now faced. The United States and its two-party political system are not built to accommodate the moderate or unaffiliated. As conversations with my interlocutors highlighted the rigidity of these political boundaries and the loyalty expected from members only heightened tensions that currently divide the two parties. As one individual told me,

I moved back to the DC area back in the early 90s, and I was talking to a co-worker, and he said, "I always vote along party lines. I don't care what the person is, how moral, how immoral: I always vote Democrat." And I was horrified, and I think that was the day that I decided that I was an independent voter.

With Trump as the Republican candidate in 2016, those Republicans who found themselves bound to party over person found themselves voting for Trump as the preferred candidate. Without a means to oust Trump from the party, there was little to stop him from imposing his will throughout his tenure as president. While absolute loyalty based strictly on party labels was an issue strongly rejected by independents like the one mentioned above, the nature of political parties creates the expectation that a

person must declare themselves a member of one of the two parties. When taken to an extreme, a person's allegiance becomes so solidified that nothing could shatter their loyalty. In such instances, it becomes increasingly difficult to notice the faults of one's party and speak out against when said party embraces a political platform radically different from its precedent.

However, Trump was far removed from familiar traditions that had bound my interlocutors to the Republican Party. For many, he was the change that Buckley claimed would trigger the conservative to yell, "Stop, at a time when no one is inclined to do so..." (1955). As this cry went ignored by members of Congress and the Trump-led Republican Party, the voice of these former Republicans transitioned from one against political extremism to one loyal toward whomever could remove Trump from office. It was for this reason Biden was considered a viable option for many self-proclaimed conservatives during the 2020 elections. Compared to Trump, the Democratic "left" offered a political stance more akin to their values. However, while Biden provided a temporary reprieve in contrast to the radicalism of Trump, it is not the solution that my interlocutors seek. The Democratic Party was, for many, a means of defeating Trump and not, as previously stated, a party for the conservative. Therefore, looking past the 2020 elections, many former Republicans echo calls for an escape from a limited two-party system. They lament that in the post-Trump era, parties have pitted conservative against liberal creating an environment where such compromise and democratic discourse remains unattainable.

To truly embrace their conservative selves, while also escaping the party of Trump, two options presented themselves. The first, as voiced by several of my interlocutors, is a complete dismantling and rebuilding of the Republican Party. As Frank told me, “I think that the GOP needs to be burned down and rebuilt. I don’t think you can save it at this point”. Others feel that a viable third-party option is needed to help break the cycle of violence currently hampering progress. Asked what this would look like, several of my interlocutors responded that it would embrace fiscally conservative principles combined with socially liberal morals. As Ray stated, “I would like to see [a] kinder, gentler party peak its head up. And... I'll have to see... What the Republicans can come up with for a candidate before I'll ever be able to vote for a Republican and my wallet again [sic].” If the Republican Party continues to embrace the violence of Trumpism, it leaves little opportunity for individuals like Ray to return. Considering the dominant presence of Trump at the time of writing this, many former Republicans may find it more desirable pursue a third-party alternative for the 2024 election.

A new party would involve balance and compromise that incorporates aspects from both the Democratic and Republican Parties. Most importantly, it would be a party free of labels – such as liberal or conservative – that divide issues into black and white categories. However, the hegemony of the two ruling parties prevents this from happening. Should the Republican Party continue to shift further toward the realm of extremism, then those ousted by Trump are unlikely to return. Likewise, if the Democratic Party shifts too far left those who found themselves able to align their conservative values with the Democratic Party will be left behind. Thus, if any progress is

to be made, both sides must be willing to look toward compromise by demonstrating the type of openness necessary for a democratic system.

### **Democracy and the Constitution**

The political phenomenon that defined Trump not only redirected the attention of my interlocutors towards fundamental issues of social and political morality, but also made many of them question the sustainability of democracy in the United States. The American constitutional system requires respect and an overall willingness to compromise with members of different political communities (Gutmann & Thompson, 2010). Prior to Trump, my interlocutors defined conservatism by tradition, prescription, and above all, the need for true community. Conservatism meant working within the boundaries of the Constitution so rights and freedoms were protected against changes that would be the death of liberty. The Constitution not only stood as a totem of stability in an ever-changing political climate, but it also served as a baseline helping to guide the moral principles that they now feel the Republican Party has dismissed. It is from the language of the Constitution that one can find the guarantees of freedom and infinite possibility characteristic of the American Dream. Within the Constitution, my interlocutors saw the permanence necessary to protect against the threat of tyranny as well as the flexibility needed to adapt to changes via constitutional amendments. Considering the sacredness of the Constitution to my interlocutors, when Trump and the Republican Party abandoned its ideals and traditions, they were forced to exit the Republican Party.

The United States Constitution was an exercise in intelligent design. It was not designed to be a static document incapable of change. As Charlie explicitly stated, it can

and should be changed if the need arises as evident by the twenty-seven amendments that make up its body. However, the constitutional politics that currently divide Congress and the country have stalled any attempts to amend the Constitution as intended. Fueling this is a threat long foreseen by Founding Fathers James Madison and Alexander Hamilton. The Founding Fathers recognized that most previous forms of democratic governments had been unstable and/or short lived (Rose-Stockwell and Tobias, 2019). Over the essays that comprise the Federalist Papers<sup>32</sup>, Madison et al. (1988) argued, inevitably, democracy falls victim to factionalism. He further clarifies that a faction can be defined as any group whether it amounts to a minority or a majority who stand united by a common interest or passion that stands averse to the rights of other citizens, or to interests of the community. To resist tyranny and combat the threat of factionalism, those elected within a representative democracy must remain free from corruption. While it is possible for a leader to become corrupt, Madison believed this less likely in a nation such as the United States whose population ensures a large pool of candidates be available at any given time. However, Madison failed to foresee the power that political parties would have in dictating political candidates. When Trump won the Republican nominee in 2016, nearly all members of the Republican Party were forced to support him based on party membership. As such, corruption was allowed to infiltrate the Republican Party leading to an erosion of democratic ideals and values.

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<sup>32</sup> *The Federalist Papers* is a collection of 85 essays written by Founding Fathers Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. These essays were written to promote the ratification of the Constitution of the United States.

For many, Trump embodied the type of corruption and factionalism that Madison warned about. Governing bodies are being further and further divided into the very factions that Madison believed would end up breaking apart the republic. Labels – not personal ideology or judge of character – now predominantly dictate-political relations within governing institutions. This is further exemplified by Trump’s “with or against” mentality that presents him as a leader intent on representing only those he considered loyal to him. As one of my interlocutors stated, “Trump does not see things as a ‘United’ States. All of this, ‘Red states’ and ‘Blue states,’ he does not care about what is best for everyone – only himself and his followers.” Those outside of Trump’s base were to be considered the enemy and treated as such. Compromise and dialogue were not an option for Trump and those who followed him.

In such an environment, the moderate or unaffiliated voter who seeks balance and compromise cannot exist. Although it is easy to fault Trump as the source of this division, Madison believed that factions could not be separated from human nature and thus this type of behaviour was inevitable. As such, both Madison and Hamilton recognized the necessity of structures capable of mitigating and/or controlling factionalism if their newly founded nation was to succeed. Both argued that governments, while capable of taking action to control factions, must not be allowed to do so as this would require the destruction of freedom and liberty. Thus, Hamilton et al. (1988) contended that the governing structures outlined in the Constitution provided the necessary checks and balances required to combat the threat of factionalism. Unlike direct democracy which relies on the explicit participation of each citizen, the representative democracy of

governing that the Constitution outlines relies on the wisdom of a chosen few entrusted by the citizens to govern to the best of their ability. The Founding Fathers contended that these chosen few would be capable of overruling the will of the mob if such a decision would send the republic spiralling towards tyranny. It was on this principle that the electoral college and election certification process was implemented should the need arise for the political elite to override the will of the masses. However, all of this hinged on the notion that those elected would adhere to the guidelines set forth by the Constitution and resist the draw of corruption and tyranny.

However, as my interlocutors stated, the elected officials chosen to represent them have abandoned the principles outlined in the Constitution. In such cases, the Constitution becomes little more than a set of institutions and practices designed to secure democratic values (see Dahl, 2001) rather than a sacred text that one swears to uphold and protect upon entering office. The actions that my interlocutors cited seeing from Trump and other high-profile members of the Republican Party have tainted the Constitution. Based on the words of individuals like Charlie and Mary, the Constitution is a document akin to the sacred. Within its words lie the basis for the values and ideology that define their sense of self. It is the opinion of my interlocutors that Trump and those who follow him have tainted the Constitution by twisting its words to fit their political agenda. In direct violation of their oath of office, those in power act only in a manner that serves the needs of their constituents and not the greater good. Therefore, the Republican Party has dragged the Constitution into the realm of the profane (Durkheim, 1912/2008). With the Republican Party tainted by its disregard for the sacredness of the Constitution, there is



no home for the Republican whose conservative identity centers around protecting the Constitution.

However, for the constitutional conservative such as Mary or Charlie, both of whom uphold the sacredness of the Constitution, the fault does not lie with the Constitution but rather with those chosen to interpret and enforce its language. As Charlie explained to me in early 2023, it is constitutional politics that has driven the country apart. This he defined as the politics of constitutionality or more precisely arguments over what does and does not fall within the scope of the Constitution as originally written. As stated, the Constitution was a document written with the intention of adapting to necessary changes<sup>33</sup>. Its meaning, values, and ideals exist beyond the limitations of linear time. For this reason, it cannot be treated as a document strictly contained within homogenous, empty time (Benjamin, 1968) as many so often do. If it were, the monumental movements and transformations that its language inspires could not and would not occur.

For as Charlie so passionately stated, “There are things called Amendments. In fact, there are 27 of them, and guess what? I can name each and every one of them!”

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<sup>33</sup> See Article V of the United States Constitution: The Congress, whenever two thirds of both Houses shall deem it necessary, shall propose Amendments to this Constitution, or, on the Application of the Legislatures of two thirds of the several States, shall call a Convention for proposing Amendments, which, in either Case, shall be valid to all Intents and Purposes, as Part of this Constitution, when ratified by the Legislatures of three fourths of the several States, or by Conventions in three fourths thereof, as the one or the other Mode of Ratification may be proposed by the Congress; Provided that no Amendment which may be made prior to the Year One thousand eight hundred and eight shall in any Manner affect the first and fourth Clauses in the Ninth Section of the first Article; and that no State, without its Consent, shall be deprived of its equal Suffrage in the Senate (U.S. Const. art. V).

Stagnation and constitutional politics are the enemy of any democratic nation. While conservatism cautions against rapid and sudden change, it does not seek to completely halt histories advance entirely. When this is combined with the overwhelming thirst for power among those elected to rule, what is left is an avenue that may prove to be the death of the United States. As the language of the Constitution is now openly and consistently twisted to only protect the liberty and freedom of a select few, many former Republicans have now been left to ponder the following question: without the means or desire to enforce these rights and freedoms, who does the Constitution truly protect?

### **The Fall of Democracy**

*And I hate the thought of American democracy dying. Is it 100% fabulous? No. But I think it's the best system in the world. And we've always had a peaceful transition of power.*

– Anonymous

Even with structures like the Constitution in place, democracy requires several key elements if it is to function effectively. The first of these is the presence of true community oriented towards the common good. As Montesquieu (1750) argued, for a democratic republic to function, there must exist a readiness to put community ahead of private interests. Herein lies the stark contrast to what my interlocutors felt. The need for true community was one of the core principles of conservative thought introduced by Kirk and Buckley, yet this was routinely absent in the face of Trump's individualistic approach to governing. Even Alexis de Tocqueville (1835) who spoke so fondly of American individualism and self-governing recognized that this was contingent on the

efforts of the many working together towards a common goal. With the rejection of true community and the common good comes the threat that American democracy will inevitably collapse. Thus, it was this fear that drove thousands of ex-Republicans to vote against Trump in 2020. Their vote was a vote against the unconstitutional and extremist individualistic policies that my interlocutors saw coming from Trump and his support base.

In addition to community and the common good, democracy requires mutual respect between the parties involved. While there may be disagreement, there must still be a favourable attitude and a productive interaction with whom one disagrees (Deneen, 2005). Democracy requires debate and deliberation. For this reason, one must be ready and willing to recognize the opinions of the other. While we might be convinced that we already have the truth, we must also be ready and willing to recognize the possible truth of others (Crapanzano, 2000). The current all or nothing rhetoric my interlocutors cited as having come to dominate the Republican Party rejects these principles. In such an environment, productive political discourse withers and dies. While political disagreement has always been present, the divisive language of the Trump era grew to a level not seen within living memory.

As Ray confided in me, “I honestly cannot think of a more polarized and heated election in my entire lifetime...Now Democrats and Republicans do not talk to each other. I really do think that the permanent impact is that we have eroded civility to a point where we can’t get it back.” As inter-group bias characteristic of human group conflict (see Tajfel et al., 1970) cements itself within American political rhetoric, the values

required for the continuation of democracy are further and further eroded. As they do, faith in American democracy begins to waiver. It raises the question of whether the great “American Democratic Experiment” that started with the signing of the Constitution is destined to meet the same fate as that has befallen other democratic institutions. Should this come to pass, it would make real the fears raised by the Founding Fathers that factionalism would prove the death of democracy. And if this should happen, there is little to stand in the way of authoritarian rule.

As Applebaum (2020) states, authoritarianism appeals to people who do not like complexity. If given the right conditions, any society can and will turn against democracy. While some have put forward the argument (see Douglas, 2020) that Trump lacks both the ideology and well-articulated party apparatus to be called an authoritarian ruler, his overly simplified and populist rhetoric provided his followers with simple solutions to complex problems. While the allure of populist authoritarianism provides the means to gather supporters for a given cause, it lacks the power to sustain it. This requires the support of intellectuals and individuals in positions of power. As Applebaum (2020) further notes, these intellectuals have shifted from pursuing the avenues of truth to defending their leaders, however disastrous the result. Trump was consistently supported by a web of lies woven by intellectuals, media personalities, and elected leaders. This collaboration effectively built a false narrative which swayed the opinions of millions of Americans. As party was prioritized over country, officials who had once publicly voiced their disdain for Trump lined up behind him in the hopes of winning over the support of his voters. As members of the American public were able and willing to forget scandal

after scandal, the conservative Republican whose support hinged on the upholding of specific core values was left further and further behind.

However, in many cases, the loyalty that Trump drew from the average voter often hinged upon the notion that Trump remained within the realm of the morally good. As Mike, expressed, “[My parents] were always trying to convince me that Trump was a great person and such a great parent.” Whether it be through the Republican Party, media, or his own political rhetoric, Trump was able to convince millions of Americans that he remained morally good. If Trump could not be considered morally good, he had to be seen as a better choice than the other party’s candidate in order to secure votes. While many were willing to consider Trump the better choice in 2016, his behaviour during his time as president removed this illusion for many. This was further reinforced by prominent events including but not limited to Covid-19 and January 6<sup>th</sup> which tested the limits that individuals were willing to go in their defence of the Republican Party.

As elected leaders remained steadfast in their loyalty to Trump, the party that they represented lost its moral appeal. These leaders willing to continue voicing their support for Trump became the intellectuals capable of supporting authoritarian regimes (see Applebaum, 2020). As demonstrated in the days that followed January 6<sup>th</sup>, officials that only a days ago had gone on the record to denounce the violence within the Capital shifted their rhetoric to match Trump’s, some going as far as to label the event a legitimate form of protest. All of this continues to perpetuate a lie that individuals can continue to tell themselves to preserve their loyalty towards the Republican Party despite the drastic shift in political morals. The existence of this lie depends upon the

participation of elected leaders, media, and fellow members of the community to normalize and give legitimacy to the narrative that Trump and the Republican Party are not only morally good, but that the other side is completely and utterly wrong. They further contend that if the other side is completely and utterly wrong, then there can be no cooperation. However, if there is no cooperation, then there can be no democracy. Therefore, the rejection of the Republican Party was more than a rejection of political identity. In many cases, it was a pledge to protect American democracy against the threat of factionalism and authoritarianism.

### **Looking Ahead: A Time for Reflection**

*I am not some smart academic like you. I am not exposed to all of this stuff. I don't understand [it] (sic)... [I] don't think about what these things mean. You ask me what conservative or liberal means and I just don't know. And I am not even sure my opinion matters.*

— Anonymous

As my work comes to its close, I find myself returning to a point raised in Chapter One: principally, who am I writing this for? It is difficult to imagine how a liberal Democrat from Manhattan, New York would end up developing a rapport and even agreeing with former members of the Republican Party. Not only that, as I reflect on the conversations I was privileged to be allotted, I realize that I find myself agreeing with many of these individuals on topics that I had previously thought impassable. For this reason alone, I hope that this piece of literature is not treated as something that has been written by an academic for academics. I ponder the words of Robert Borofsky, who is

widely viewed as one of the leading figures in public anthropology. Borofsky has repeatedly expressed concern that anthropologists are building a wall around themselves (see Hedican, 2016), thereby alienating ourselves from those that we claim to serve. As he states, “Anthropologists have tended to turn in on themselves, to direct their conversations primarily toward other anthropologists. They now rarely engage in extended discussions, as public intellectuals, with those beyond the walls of academia” (Borofsky, 1996, pg. 6). Therefore, Borofsky argues that the purpose of public anthropology is to demonstrate the capability for anthropologists to confront problems beyond the traditional scope of the discipline. In doing so, they illuminate larger topical social issues and encourage open conversations. These conversations are not only directed at advancing personal or institutional academic achievements, but also have the explicit goal of fostering meaningful social and/or political change (McGranahan, 2006).

The first issue of *National Review* highlighted the resentment Buckley and others felt towards the liberal academic elite (see Buckley, 1955). This backlash helped to kickstart the American conservative movement and was a fundamental factor in Trump’s 2016 victory. As the 2016 election demonstrated, the walls that academics, political scientists, and analysts built around themselves ignored rising feelings of anger and resentment that many working-class voters harboured (Multz, 2018). This disconnect became increasingly clear to me throughout my fieldwork, and upon reflection, I have come to recognize the degree that my political imaginary is in many ways a product of my academic privilege. Invoking the writings of Peggy McIntosh (1989), my own form of privilege presents itself as an invisible force whose presence exposes the individual to the

violence of everyday life. Systemic violence, institutional racism, and class struggle are all issues capable of remaining invisible. Confronting these issues requires an individual to rethink their own positionality. As demonstrated in the analogy that Plato (c. 375 BCE/2017) proposed in the famous Allegory of the Cave, change cannot be forced upon the individual for to do so leaves a person blinded and in pain. Therefore, the role of the academic is to present obscure ideas as an invitation to the public to spark reflection and incite change. Further, pathways towards this change must be carved in such a way that they do not ignore the feelings of the individual. It is through ethnography that we can develop responses that work with rather than against those we study. While we may be unable to completely sway all contrasting opinions, we can prevent those willing to work with us from being excluded and ignored.

Inspiration for this approach comes from the middle of the road approach sought by my interlocutors. Even in cases like Bravo or Harry, both of whom agreed in principle with the socially progressive ideals typically associated with liberal ideology in the United States, the implementation of these changes could not remain separate from a conservative approach to change. Based on our conversations, I am of the opinion that both shared an affinity for social change provided that change was met with prudence and consideration. Therefore, when asked about the rhetoric labeled as part of the “far-left,” my interlocutors felt there were often similarities between the two extreme ends of the political spectrum. One side desired either stagnation or social regression while the other desired mass socio-economic reform. Further, neither were open to hearing the opinions of the other. As one individual stated, “I have a family member in California, and it is



almost the same thing. If you're not part of [the left] you're a racist and a sexist or whatever. And I just think that's wrong." Ethnography benefits from its ability to navigate the complex social, political, and economic circumstances that might be overlooked by group activism.

However, as Furner (1975) made clear within her study on advocacy and objectivity, social activism was frequently sidelined from discussion as academics joined the academy as "professionals" (cited by Borofsky and De Lauri, 2019). If we are to do right by our interlocutors, particularly those alienated by polarizing political parties, the focus must be on generating discourse that advances the common good. In this case, the common good requires the consideration of both liberal and conservative thought, only achievable through compromise and discussion. Considering their liminal status, I argue that the moderate and unaffiliated are critical political voices who could be instrumental in the development of bi-partisan solutions to future and current political problems.

As repeatedly stressed, one of the greatest threats that democratic institutions such as the United States face is the lack of cross-party discourse. Partisanship has divided individuals into factions that split the nation-state into red and blue communities. Caught in the middle of this split are individuals such as my interlocutors who, despite their more conservative beliefs, are willing to engage in dialogue with a liberal minded population in the hopes of reaching compromise and agreement. This was certainly made evident to me by the consistent eagerness of my interlocutors to engage in complex political discussions with a liberal academic like me. Going into this project I knew that I would not be able to separate my own political views from what I would later end up writing. As Weber

(1949) made note, partiality is the inescapable dilemma of the social sciences (cited by Aretxaga, 1997). Having recognized this, interlocutors were told of my positionality and liberal political background. In contrast to what has been seen among far-right and far-left communities, each made the conscious decision to continue actively engaging in political discourse. Research such as this acts as an invitation for the contemplation of contrasting options allowing both parties to brainstorm possible solutions to shared problems and concerns.

While the presence of a common enemy i.e., Trump, certainly aided in facilitating these conversations, it was not the sole reason we were able to engage in dialogue. As noted on many occasions, my interlocutors and I shared concerns over common problems. Some examples being reproductive rights, healthcare, gun control, and education. Despite often disagreeing on the exact solution, there usually emerged a path of dialogue reaching possible compromises that began to address the problems at hand. However, this dialogue was only achievable through the deliberate invocation of contrasting political opinions as I sought to learn from these individuals. As I have come to realize, had I shared the same ideals as my interlocutors, I would have been just another voice in an increasingly vocal echo chamber that isolates members into distinct communities. Likewise, had I or my interlocutors been too far apart, then it is highly unlikely that such cross dialogue would have occurred.

As my interlocutors' experiences highlighted, dialogue is increasingly difficult if and/or when your views have been labelled as morally and utterly wrong. While my own liberal beliefs certainly extend beyond what many would consider "moderate," they were

often countered by my position as a researcher seeking to engage with interlocutors despite our political differences. When presented with a choiceless decision, as is so often the case in a binary system like the United States, differences that would have once caused an individual to reject the other are overlooked in favour of seeking alternative methods of political discourse. Falling back on the common expression, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” Trump created avenues for the former Republican to seek out new allies as they fought to remove him from *their* Republican Party.

With a common enemy and a desire to learn from our political differences, the potential for conflict was mitigated by a desire to fix what is currently broken. As Podgornik-Jakil and Bens (2021) note, any form of activism relies on some theory of action. The decision to try and change the world hinges on belief in the ability of individuals or groups to facilitate such change. However, we must also recognize that any action remains subject to structural constraints. As such, the question of how people can act, to what degree, and in what direction in any given circumstance is also a central question of any activist. The flaws in the American two-party system have highlighted the limits of group action. Barring a change to the entire political system, a third-party candidate is unlikely to emerge during the 2024 election. Should Trumpism remain the dominant rhetoric within the Republican Party, the current system limits the power any one individual has in bringing about substantial structural change. In contrast, the opportunity for small community organizing remains a viable option for those willing to initiate the often-difficult conversations (see McAleve, 2016). While not always

successful, the connection that ethnography provides lends itself to beginning this process.

However, doing so requires a willingness to openly consider the position of the other and embrace our own positionality. Throughout this process, it was not uncommon for me to be called “brave” or “bold” by my interlocutors. As one individual told me, “Your whole focus on this study is amazing. Especially being a staunch liberal taking on topics such as this. You're brave...”. However, as I sit here reflecting on these comments, I find myself wondering whether this concept of bravery speaks highly of me or perhaps more accurately, reflects the breakdown of political relationships within the United States. As I have stated, many of my interlocutors reminisce of a time in which it was possible to discuss political issues without the complete breakdown of personal relationships and loss of civility.

While it is worth pondering where we went wrong, I as well as those I had the opportunity to speak to, cannot help but wonder where we go from here. As the last few months have shown, Trumpism does not appear to be going away anytime soon. Trump’s intention to run for president in 2024 offers yet another opportunity for American voters to fall victim to the allure of authoritarianism and populism. Further, with waves of Republican led legislation sweeping across the United States, social conservatism - has if it was not already - become the new normal for the Republican Party. While the Republican Party’s current approach starkly contrasts the values my interlocutors assign to American conservatism, without a way to voice concerns on issues of fiscal importance, few may continue to find the Democratic Party a viable option.

Ultimately, the future of the Republican Party and conservative politics in the United States depends on several factors. First is the ability of the Republican Party to adapt to shifts in public opinion particularly regarding social policies. The results of the 2022 midterm election suggests that public opinion on topics like reproductive rights has shifted to favour a more balanced moderate approach. Since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, seven states have voted on abortion measures. In all seven states<sup>34</sup>, anti-abortion groups were defeated at the ballot. This not only included liberal states like California and Vermont,<sup>35</sup> but also included conservative strongholds such as Kentucky and Kansas (Terkel and Wu, 2023).<sup>36</sup> While DeSantis’s campaign against “woke” culture and trans rights gained him recognition in his home state of Florida, it has thus far failed to gain traction when pitted against Trump’s campaign of “law and order” (Weisman, 2023). Failure on behalf of the Republican Party to reconnect with the moderate conservative could lead to a repeat of the 2020 election. Alternatively, should enough voters remain dissatisfied with Biden and the Democratic Party, Trump may very well carry the 2024 elections. A third possibility is that Trump’s continued presence and the widening gap between the far-right and far-left may open the door for a viable third-party candidate. As suggested, the emergence of such a party has historically been impeded by factors such as ballot access laws, partisan identity, party loyalty, lack of funding, and the electoral

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<sup>34</sup> In addition to those mentioned, other states include Ohio, Michigan, and Montana.

<sup>35</sup> Both California and Vermont passed a state constitutional amendment guaranteeing the right to abortion on November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Voters in Kentucky and Kansas rejected a state constitutional amendment that would have said there is no right to an abortion.

college. However, dissatisfaction with the new conservative politics of the Republican Party in combination with current apathy towards the Democratic Party could lead to a splitting of the two major parties. What this party looks like will depend heavily on whether the fiscal or social arms of American conservatism take precedence.

Finally, the most significant implication regarding the future of the Republican Party is the outcome of Trump's legal battles. As of August 2023, Trump faces 91 felony charges across three different cases<sup>37</sup>. Despite this, Trump maintains a commanding lead over the pool of Republican candidates. Trump's denial of any wrong doings has only furthered distrust for the American justice system among his supporters. Calling the investigations "political witch-hunts" Trump has the potential to discredit the entire US Justice Department. Further, should Trump succeed in once again securing the nominee, the US justice system faces the prospect of having to prosecute a presidential candidate. While the 2024 election field looks different from 2016 and 2020, Trump's ability to deflect accusations, produce misinformation, and hold the support of voters remains an equally prominent political force.

Trump won the 2016 election by relying on populist language that distanced himself from the political elite. Among these elite were the highly educated, wealthy, white collared individuals. Through my fieldwork, I found myself becoming increasingly

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<sup>37</sup> Trump currently faces 34 felony counts in New York in connection with hush money payments. He faces a further 40 felony counts in Florida for harbouring classified documents and impeding efforts to retrieve them. In Washington DC, he faces 4 felony counts for his efforts to overturn the 2020 election. Finally, he faces 13 felony counts in Georgia for his election interference in that state (Tracking the Trump criminal cases, 2023).

aware of this as well as the stigma it places upon members of the academic community. Anthropological research needs to do more than just meet the needs of academics. While topics such as “applied anthropology” have historically been met with hesitancy and contempt (Bennett, 1996), recent work has highlighted the merits of applying anthropological field methods beyond the traditional scope of academia. Examples of this include the use of “deep canvassing” during the 2020 election that relied on deep and meaningful conversations with voters (Medina, 2021). Situating work such as this within the realm of anthropology not only expands the field beyond the scope of traditional ethnography, but it also ensures that when our interlocutors speak, they are given a voice that carries real meaning and not just background noise. Thus, as we continue to look at ways to expand the scope of our discipline, let us not shy away from opportunities to invoke our own positionality as means of furthering discussion between our fellow community members.

I argue this point as I realize that my interlocutors’ interest and participation did not stem from the promise of grand theoretical discussion on notions of conservatism and liberalism. It is my belief that the genuine interest shown to me by those involved stemmed from the opportunity to not only have their voices heard, but to have the chance to engage in productive dialogue with a member of the opposing party. One of my interlocutors would later confide in me after a particularly enervating conversation on policing and racism within the United States, “Wow, you're like, my therapist.” When later asked if he would agree to a follow-up interview, this individual jokingly replied, “Of course I am always happy to talk with my therapist Kyle.” Moreover, this provided a

reprieve from the ongoing feelings of hopelessness and abandonment caused by the changes they saw happening to *their* Republican Party. As I was frequently asked, “So what are you finding so far?” or “What have others said to you? Do they feel the same?” I believe these questions to be more than just friendly inquiries into the research process. The frequency that I was asked highlights the desire to feel as though one is a member of a community.

With its focus on one-on-one interviews and ethnographic field methods, anthropology as a discipline is positioned to generate the environment conducive to the type of dialogue identified as necessary for the continuation of democratic society. With its focus on emotions and lived experience, ethnography provides us with access to a “diversity of tactics” that Dixon (2014) cites as necessary to advance social and political movements. However, I believe that we must learn to recognize the limits of these tools. For discourse to occur, there requires a willingness on behalf of both parties to engage in political discussions that may also include the consideration of the other. When recalling the experiences of Charlie, Laura, and many others, this willingness is absent amongst the far-right and far-left. Thus, while it is easy to be drawn in by the allure of the study of the far-right/far-left, we must recognize these limitations and not allow ourselves to neglect those caught between these two groups. While the far-right/far-left provides us with deeper understandings of the world around us, many of these conversations lack the type of two-way dialogue necessary to directly address real world issues. Therefore, while I do not suggest that we shy away from opportunities to engage with these groups, let us also work to include those silenced by the noise generated by political extremism. The voices



of these individuals can provide equally rich ethnographic material well suited to ongoing efforts to expand our discipline.

Finally, this type of engagement presents us as researchers with key opportunities for self-learning and self-growth. As such, we should be challenging ourselves to engage in research that not only challenges our own views but invites our interlocutors to act as more than a source of information. Several times throughout the research process I was asked by my interlocutors if I believed that I had become more conservative. While I am still not sure of the answer to this question, I come to admit that I now see faults within my own liberal position that I did not see before. As mentioned earlier, on several occasions I found myself agreeing with positions I once thought in conflict with my own political imaginary. This agreement stemmed not from a shift in my own political opinions, but from a realization that we both sought similar outcomes, albeit through different means. Quite often my interlocutors agreed with the utopic desires typically espoused by progressive groups i.e., access to healthcare, reproductive rights, gun control etc. However, many found fault with the all or nothing approach. As Bravo succinctly put it, “I think for most things the answer lies somewhere in the center.” With its focus on relativism and qualitative data, anthropology can uncover pathways that cut through the above-mentioned center. While these types of projects may not as easily lend themselves as easily to the same type of academic publications that are so commonly used to reinforce the discipline, I argue they do more to serve our interlocutors and the discipline.

Through my work, I have come to the humbling realization that, like those who found themselves willing to follow Trump in 2016 due to party loyalty, I was blinded by

my own inter-group bias. As I have learned, it is far more difficult to see fault within your own political community than it is to find fault with your opponent. To break free of patterns of the ordinary, one is forced to confront the changes brought forth by the extraordinary. Thus, while I cannot deny that I remain a staunch liberal, the extraordinary nature of Trumpism has opened my eyes to the merits of certain conservative ideals valued by my interlocutors. At the very least, I am more open to hearing the merits of the opposition and accepting the flaws of my political affiliations. It is my hope and aim that my work will inspire readers to reflect upon their own political imaginary and discover new possibilities for a future where politics are not inherently divisive but invite conversation, compromise, and community.

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