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## **Reagan's Conservatism: Principles versus Ideology in the Shaping of a New Republican Party** *Henry Olsen*

Conservatives are rightly worried about America's future. The left is energized and at times triumphant, in control of institutions like the media, universities, and many large corporations. The Republican Party appears badly divided between die-hard supporters and opponents of Donald Trump. Pessimism reigns on the right, and not without cause.

This seems so new and unusual, but it really isn't. Conservatives felt the same way four score and four years ago when they gathered for their annual, then-tiny, meeting: the Conservative Political Action Convention. They wanted to hear their idol, a former Governor and twice-defeated candidate for President. The common wisdom held that he and his allies were washed up. But Ronald Reagan would prove them wrong.

Reagan is known as "The Great Communicator" for good reason. His words time and again gave hope to the hopeless and even inspired the world. The speech he gave to the [1977 CPAC](#) isn't among his most famous. It is, however, among his most important. If conservatives really want to retake America and conserve her timeless principles, they should harken back to that speech and study it closely. The strategy he laid out then is as relevant today as it was then.

### **"A New Republican Party"**

Reagan's speech was titled "A New Republican Party." The country surely needed a new GOP, because the old one was on life support. Republicans held only 143 of the 538 House seats, 38 of 100 Senate seats, and a paltry 12 of the 50 governorships. Only one in five Americans told pollsters they were Republicans. Many conservatives thought the GOP was so damaged that they would have to found a new party.

Reagan disagreed. His speech showed how a new Republican Party could be successfully built out of the existing hulk. He also demonstrated how it would be founded in principle even as it would require compromise to create and maintain. Most importantly, he explained how ideology was the enemy of principle, and why insisting on purity tests would cause this new party to be stillborn.

## **A Conservative Majority, Then**

This new party could not be built if there weren't enough conservatives to support it. Fortunately, there were. Reagan cited a series of polls that showed either a large plurality or a majority of Americans described themselves as right of center or conservatives. These people who already called themselves conservative would be the cornerstone of this new crusade.

The trouble, however, was that not every self-described conservative wanted the same things. "Conservatism can and does mean different things to those who call themselves conservatives," Reagan acknowledged. This need not pose an insuperable barrier to the effort. Conservatives needed to dedicate themselves to the project of creating "a political entity that will reflect the view of the great, hitherto [unacknowledged], conservative majority."

Back then, this meant building a union between economic and social conservatives. Economic conservatives, Reagan said, were people, "usually associated with Republican Party members and independents who concentrate their attention on economic matters," who were concerned about "inflation, deficit spending, and big government". Social conservatives – people "usually associated with blue-collar, ethnic and religious groups themselves traditionally associated with the Democratic Party" – were concerned about things like "law and order, abortion, busing, [and] quota systems." Separated by a partisan gulf, each was powerless in the face of liberalism. Brought together into "one politically effective whole," they would be invincible.

It's now commonplace to speak of American conservatism as resting on three stools, economics, social issues, and national defense. That platform was built by Reagan along the lines he set forth in his CPAC speech. Old-line economic conservatives had their interests addressed, newly Republican social conservatives had theirs met, and both wings cared equally about the premier foreign policy challenge of the day, defeating the global aspirations of Soviet Communism. The coalition envisioned by Reagan on his 66<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1977 became real, and while none of the partners realized all of their dreams, all saw progress on things they cared about. The result was a Reagan-formed political consensus that even Democrats like Bill Clinton and Barack Obama had to yield to in important matters.

## **A Conservative Majority, Today**

The same opportunity exists for conservatives today. The dividing lines are different because the issues are different. We nonetheless have a grand opportunity to unite four wings of modern conservatism separated by a partisan gulf into one, politically effective whole. Building that "New Republican Party" is the task that today's Reagan must strive for.

Those wings can be best thought of as animals in a zoo: elephants, TIGRs, RAMs, and RINOs. The elephants are the Republican Party's core, the remnants of the old Reagan conservatism. These voters may differ in their emphases between social issues or economic concerns, and like any large tribe they differ on the particulars. But they share a common belief in the American

way of life, in the enduring truth of American principles of liberty, equality of rights, and human dignity. This group will easily be the largest inside this larger, majority GOP tent.

The next group, the TIGRs, is already largely inside the tent. TIGRs stands for “Trump Is Great Republicans.” These are the non-college-educated white voters who flocked to Trump *en masse* in 2016 and stayed with him – and his new party - through thick and thin. Prior to Trump, these men and women had voted Democratic since the end of the Reagan era. They were less concerned about traditional social issues and more wedded to big government than those of similar demographics who joined the GOP permanently decades ago. But they were not hardened liberals and they were certainly not modern progressives. Led by a man who eschewed traditional Republican rhetoric about empowering bosses and who set aside cutting the entitlements they depend on, they were perfectly willing to join a reformed GOP that also spoke to their concerns.

These concerns straddle both traditional wings of Reagan-era conservatism. TIGRs are to the left of the old Reagan consensus when it comes to government spending and activity, favoring more of both than older conservatives tend to be comfortable with. But they also strongly support deregulation and the private sector, opposing socialism in its red and green forms. They fit between the old fault lines, but they are firmly on the right on the newly emerging fault line between socialism and a humane capitalism.

TIGRs also don’t fit neatly into the old social conservative box, but also aren’t progressives. These voters tend to be less religiously observant and simply aren’t moved by concerns about religious liberty, same-sex marriage, or abortion. They do care about their culture: patriotic, small-town values that are increasingly under attack by the woke left. They don’t think they’re “deplorable” or racist, and they strongly resent the culture war being waged against them. They share these values with the elephants, as a recent EPPC-YouGov poll shows.

TIGRs, therefore, are both economic and social conservatives, as those terms are redefined for today’s age. They want protection from unfair economic competition, which is why they like calls to end illegal immigration and fight unfair global trade competition. They also want protection from the left’s culture warriors. Give them this, as Trump did, and they will happily join a Republican Party that also addresses traditional conservative concerns.

It’s often said that Trump brought these voters into the Republican alliance. That’s only partly true. Look carefully and you can see that these voters were the reason why Democrats were shellacked in the 2010 midterms. Forty-four of the 63 House seats Republicans gained then were in the South or Midwest. Some were GOP-leaning seats that had fallen in the 2006 and 2008 Democratic landslides, but many were long-held Democratic seats in white working-class areas. If one lays a map of these seats over a map of 2016 presidential county-level election returns, one would find an eerie overlap between these old Democratic, working-class seats and places where Trump gained the most compared with Mitt Romney’s 2012 showing. In Wisconsin, they were also the voters who backed Scott Walker twice in 2010 and 2014, and

supported him in his 2012 recall election. TIGRs flirted with the GOP well before Trump romanced them into the party.

RAMs are the newest, and perhaps the most important, potential members of the New Republican Party. RAMs stands for Recently Arrived Migrants, and they are the Latinos and Asians whose ranks are surging. These voters also tend to be working-class like whites and tend to strongly identify with American ideals. That's why they came here, after all. They share many of the TIGRs' economic and social priorities, but their ethnicity and relatively recent arrival in this country marks them as somewhat different. They need to be convinced that the New Republican Party has a place for people who look and worship like them. If they are persuaded, then they are open to a GOP that reflects the Trump-era alliance between elephants and TIGRs.

Trump himself started to bring RAMs into the fold in 2020. It's been noted that Trump surged in many Latino areas such as Cuban-dominated Miami-Dade County and Texas' Rio Grande Valley. It's less well known that he also [gained in](#) Latino areas across the country, such as Mexican neighborhoods in Chicago and Los Angeles and Puerto Rican areas in Philadelphia. He also picked up votes populated by Asian, Eastern European, and Middle Eastern immigrants. Vietnamese in California's Orange County shifted from blue to red and Iranians in Beverly Hills moved sharply to the right. Trump's nationalism and willingness to forthrightly confront China and Russia paid electoral dividends among RAMs. These shifts might have been responsible for as many as seven of the fourteen House seats Republicans picked up from the Democrats.

RINOs – Republicans In Name Only – are the final group needed to build a majority Republican Party. Despite the derisive moniker, many of these voters are conservative and traditionally have backed Republicans. These largely upper-income, highly educated urbanites and suburbanites are the people who abandoned Trump and the GOP in 2016 and 2020. Many of these voters now consider themselves Democrats. Many others don't, however, and are still up for grabs. These people tend to value the private sector and economy in government but not smaller government for its own sake. They are often moderately liberal on old social issues but staunchly conservative when it comes to the new, woke-defined social agenda. Bringing these voters back into the GOP tent is crucial to winning backs the suburbs and cementing the party's new, and durable, majority.

### **Timeless Conservative Principles**

Bringing these groups together may seem daunting or even impossible to many readers. Today's challenge, however, is no greater than that faced by Reagan 44 years ago. That era's social conservatives had been bred to hate the Depression-causing, average-person-hating Republicans. Southern social conservatives faced the additional hurdle of the Civil War, which they had been taught was really a "War Between the States" initiated by the dastardly Republican Abraham Lincoln. Reagan, a former Democrat himself, was well aware of how his project could crash upon the rocks before it even began. That's why he sought to ground this new party firmly in conservative principle.

Reagan used a large part of his speech describing those principles, using the 1976 GOP platform as his guide. His New Republican Party believed in liberty, “measured by how much freedom Americans have to make their own decisions, even their own mistakes”. It believed in the family, contending that they are “the foundation of our nation” and pledging that “our government’s programs, actions, officials and social welfare institutions [should] never be allowed to jeopardize the family”. It supported “the American market system,” and it “must always stand for peace and liberty in the world and the rights of the individual.” The latter principle required, in a world with malign and powerful adversaries, “maintaining a superior national defense, second to none.”

These are admittedly broad principles. Conservatives can disagree on whether a government program restricts freedom too much in the name of another goal Reagan mentioned, being “compassionate in caring for those citizens who are unable to care for themselves.” Conservatives can dispute how large the military should be and whom we should ally with and whom we should oppose. Those principles, however, also set limits on what conservatives and the New Republican Party can entertain. Principles differ from instructions, in that they inspire creativity rather than specific and unalterable actions.

These principles can unite today’s conservative groups as much as they did Reagan’s. All four of modern conservatism’s demographic building blocks believe in the liberty of the individual. All believe in the family as the cornerstone of American society. All support free enterprise and all believe America’s history and principles are mainly good and worth conserving. All also believe in protecting those principles and the nation that enshrines them against all enemies, foreign and domestic. Disputes among and between these groups there will be, but disagreement on these basic principles there will not.

An aspiring Reagan will need to referee and guide those disputes while maintaining the new party’s unity. Reagan himself knew this would be difficult, as those who engage in these disputes often confuse their own conclusions for principle. That’s why he warned his listeners against the temptation of ideology, a temptation whose lure would lead to ruin.

### **Ideology is Conservatism’s Enemy**

Reagan’s admonition against ideology is perhaps the most important segment of his speech, especially for today’s audience. Movement conservatives are used to thinking of themselves as adhering to an ideology and often assess whether someone else is a conservative by measuring that person’s beliefs against a template of positions that a “real conservative” is supposed to hold. The habit has become so ingrained that many probably think Reagan, as the person who brought movement conservatism into the political conversation, acted the same way. Nothing could be further from the truth.

To Reagan, ideology was the enemy of principle. Ideology was a “rigid, irrational clinging to abstract theory in the face of reality. . . . If the facts don’t happen to fit the ideology, the facts

are chopped off and discarded.” He believed this mode of thinking was “the complete opposite to principled conservatism.”

Conservatism, he went on, was based on “the common sense and common decency of ordinary men and women, working out their own lives in their own way.” It was not an abstract principle applied to explain events; it was a way of discovering consistent principles from the unfolding of events. In Reagan’s eyes, principles could inform but would not artificially constrain or foreordain political action.

We can see the difference between principle and ideology in a long series of actions in Reagan’s own career. He opposed tax increases, but actively supported tax hikes both as Governor and as President. In each case he got something else he valued – a balanced budget in California and the promise of spending cuts in Washington. Reagan was an ardent free trader, but he nonetheless imposed quotas and tariffs on Japanese imports at least four times as President because he believed the Japanese weren’t abiding by free trade principles themselves. Most famously, the ardent anti-Communist and arms control opponent signed an arms control deal with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987 - to the consternation of his long-time conservative allies – because he believed doing so would weaken the Communist Party’s hold on the Russian people. He was able to make these transitions because adherence to principle allowed him to adapt the circumstances as he found them rather than wait in vain for the ideologically perfect moment to get everything he wanted.

There was another reason Reagan counseled against ideological purity: Americans wouldn’t stand for it. “Most of us, I guess, like to think of ourselves as avoiding both [political] extremes,” Reagan told his conservative audience. Ideological, abstract theorizing “turns off the American people,” he said. He went on to say that “If we allow ourselves to be portrayed as ideological shock troops . . . we are doing ourselves and our cause a disservice.” To win, conservatives had to eliminate “the myth of a small group of ideological purists trying to capture a majority [and] [r]eplace it with the reality of a majority trying to assert its rights.”

There will always be those who would rather be right than be President. But if someone has to be President, any majority coalition will have to be wide. People within that coalition will disagree about many particulars; they will not all sing from the identical hymnal. But they can – indeed, must – share a set of clear principles in common that define them against their adversaries. Reagan’s CPAC shows how that can be done.

### **The GOP’s Blue-Collar Future**

Most serious political strategists know that the Republican Party’s future lies in its ability to become a “[multi-ethnic, multi-racial, working-class](#)” party. Here, too, Reagan was far ahead of his contemporaries (and even many of his successors). The New Republican Party he envisioned would explicitly reach out beyond its traditional, upper-income and business-backed base to attract majorities from all walks of life.

Reagan knew that wouldn't be easy. It could not be "limited to the country club-big business image that, for reasons both fair and unfair, it is burdened with today." It would "have room for the man and the woman in the factories, for the farmer, for the cop on the beat and the millions of Americans who may never have thought of joining our party before, but whose interests coincide with those represented by principled Republicanism." This did not simply mean taking their votes on Election Day and ignoring them for the rest of the election cycle. It meant embracing these people "not only as rank-and-file members but as leaders and as candidates." The New Republican Party would have to "mak[e] certain they have a say in what goes on in the party."

This in turn meant the party would be inclusive to all who shared its principles. Back then, blacks were the only significant racial minority in the electorate. Reagan thus explicitly argued that this party should represent black voters, presaging modern conservatives like Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina when he said, "we believe in treating all Americans as individuals and not as stereotypes or voting blocs." That principle extended to everyone, regardless of color or creed. Reagan's "new revitalized Republican Party" would not be "one based on a principle of exclusion."

On that score, Reagan waxed in an almost evangelical voice. "If we truly believe in our principles, we should sit down and talk," he told the assembled conventiongoers. "Talk with anyone, anywhere, at any time if it means talking about the principles for the Republican Party." The point of an evangelical outreach is to bring newcomers in, not reassure the base. "Conservatism is not a narrow ideology," Reagan reiterated, "nor is it the exclusive property of conservative activists."

Trump's new recruits, the TIGRs and the RAMs, would recognize those words. These people rejected the Republican Party of John McCain, who promised old solutions to new problems. They rejected the GOP of Mitt Romney, the archetypal business leader who seemed to be burdened with the old country-club image Reagan had warned the GOP to move away from. They flocked to the brash outsider who talked in harsh tones for many but made it clear whose side he was on: *theirs*.

Nine years ago, the GOP elite bought into a so-called autopsy that relied heavily on a [liberal immigration policy](#) to attract America's growing Hispanic and Asian populations. In 2020, the man who was the polar opposite of what the autopsy's authors envisioned did better among voters of those groups than any of the elites ever expected. They knew that the traditional Republican elites only wanted their votes, not their voices. Trump, and the new Republican Party his heirs must now complete, know differently.

### **A Choice, Not an Echo**

Today's conservatives can retreat into their comfortable bunkers and await the liberal onslaught, secure in the knowledge that they never flinched in battle, even as their adversary's superior numbers overwhelmed their defenses. Or they can rekindle Ronald Reagan's vision of

a New Republican Party, conceived in liberty and dedicated to conservative principles that meet the challenges of our time. There's a majority of Americans willing to join that effort if only they were asked. As Reagan's advised his generation's conservatives, "[w]e are not a cult, we are members of a majority. Let's act and talk like it."