

Donald Trump and the Chamber of Republican Secrets

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I am sure people of different political perspectives will import different meanings to my talk's Harry Potter-esque title. People who don't like Donald Trump are sure that I am going to castigate him as a Voldemort who has unlocked the Chamber of Secrets that will devour America, while Trump supporters might note that I put Trump in the first title position, which might imply that I think he is the Chosen One. But neither of those is the case. The fact is that Donald Trump has simply opened the Republican Chamber of Secrets, a chamber that Republicans have largely kept secret even from themselves.

The Republican Party has three secrets. First, unlike what many Republicans themselves and apparently almost every primary candidate except for Donald Trump and John Kasich believed, the Republican Party is not a monolithic party composed of anti-government and religious conservatives. In fact, prior to Donald Trump the GOP was divided into four observable factions that have been relatively durable and constant for at least the last twenty years, and the majority factions were not the most conservative factions.

The second secret is that, despite Republican belief to the contrary, Republican voters are not the country's natural majority. Republicans often argue otherwise, pointing to successes in electing presidents and governors. These people say that America is a center-right country and consequently as a center-right party, the Republican Party is the majority party. Wrong.

The Republican Party has been a minority party for eighty-five years. The Republican Party continues to have problems today gaining a national majority and is now in the midst of its worst spell with respect to winning majorities of the popular vote and the presidency since the party's founding in 1854. They have won the presidential popular vote in one of the last seven elections. This is a party that was at war with itself and at war with the values of the country prior to Donald Trump's election.

The third secret is that the only group that the Republican Party could possibly talk to that does not create even more conflict with the existing party than is necessary to create a majority was the very group Donald Trump spoke to. This group is blue-collar whites who are not evangelical, but who dominate Pennsylvania and the other states that touch the Great Lakes. These are the only voters who had

enough agreement with the other Republican factions that they would not further divide an already fractured party and throw it into irrevocable civil war. Donald Trump activated this group and brought them into the Republican coalition, which gave him the presidency. He nevertheless lost some of the people who are traditional Republicans, but even this showed how powerful the blue-collar whites are. By winning them so overwhelmingly, Trump could win a majority in the Electoral College even though he lost the popular vote by two percent—the first time this had been done since 1876.

These secrets were on display in the debate we saw this year about the replacement for Obamacare. The Freedom Caucus represents what it thinks is the majority of the Republican Party but is demonstrably a minority. The moderates represent a necessary part of the party, but they are also a minority; and the large group of people in the middle, the somewhat conservatives, are the largest single faction of the House Republican caucus but can't rule without consent of the others. Their inability to agree on a replacement plan threw the GOP's seven-year promise to replace Obamacare into the dustbin of history.

Going forward, the Republican Party can only avoid minority status and irrelevancy if it unites these factions and the Trump blue-collar voters into one group. It means that they need to find a way so that these people no longer see themselves as enemies but as allies. And the last person to put these groups together in a way that created a durable and lasting governing majority was Ronald Reagan.

WHO IS THE REPUBLICAN PARTY?

What's the proof for each of those statements? According to exit polls, the Republican Party is divided into four groups. The largest group is what pollsters call "somewhat conservatives." These people are generally against government expansion but not necessarily for government reduction; they are against tax increases but not always for tax cuts. This sort of person prefers former speaker John Boehner or current House speaker Paul Ryan to people like Ted Cruz or members of the Freedom Caucus. It was not an accident that when Ted Cruz was fighting for his political life in the week before last May's Indiana primary, John Boehner came out of semi-imposed retirement to tell people that Ted Cruz was "Lucifer in the flesh" and that he had Donald Trump on speed dial. That was his signal to the GOP's single largest bloc of voters who they should support. They listened. Ted Cruz lost that primary by sixteen points even though he won among people who said they were very conservative. He was demolished among people who said they were somewhat conservative.

The next largest faction in the Republican Party is the religious conservatives. These are people who tell voters that they are very conservative and vote primarily on questions of social conservatism. In the past that was mainly pro-life positions, but in recent years these voters have preferred men who talk in overtly religious tones. Religious conservatives were behind Pat Buchanan in 1996, Mike Huckabee in

2008, and Rick Santorum in 2012. These voters are about a quarter of the Republican Party nationally, and they dominate places that vote early. That is one of the reasons their favorite often does well: they dominate the Iowa caucuses and the Deep South. Since those states vote early, candidates favored by religious conservatives usually defeat their other very conservative competitors.

But each of the candidates favored by religious conservatives finds that the majority of the Republican Party does not want to nominate someone who is mainly a religious conservative. The only person who was this group's favorite who has managed to make it to the presidency was George W. Bush, and his campaign wasn't based on social conservatism. He did not campaign as a hardcore person on social issues, and he appealed to the somewhat conservatives. In the Iowa caucuses, 45% of religious conservatives backed people who were running to George W. Bush's right: either Gary Bauer or Alan Keyes.

The third largest group is, oddly enough, the moderates. Many people think there are no more moderate Republicans. The *Onion*, a satirical publication, ran a piece a few years ago which said the last moderate Republicans were going to be captured, tagged, and then put back into the wild to see whether they would reproduce. But the fact is that moderates are a large faction in the Northeast, the Great Lakes states, and the Pacific Coast states. The reason you don't hear much about Republican moderates is because they live in states that don't send a lot of Republicans to Congress, but these Republican moderates do live in states that send a lot of delegates to the Republican National Convention—states like New York, California, Massachusetts, and Connecticut.

Moderates traditionally like candid candidates. They are also traditionally the only group that was pro-choice on abortion. On a host of issues, if religious conservatives are for X, the moderates are for the opposite of X. In the 2016 Republican primary, John Kasich focused on these people with laser-like precision by using language supportive of hot-button social issues including same-sex marriage and religious liberty that social conservatives abhorred but which moderates supported.

Moderates are like religious conservatives only in that they're not large enough to nominate their first choice. In the past, their favorite exited the race early, and they ended up providing the crucial support in the Northeast and the Great Lakes states to the somewhat-conservative favorite. That's how Bob Dole in 1996, John McCain in 2008, and Mitt Romney in 2012 won their nominations over their religious conservative challengers.

The last group is one we hear a lot about, but the data suggest that they comprise no more than one-sixth of Republican voters nationally. These are the small-government and "libertarian" conservatives. The party that says it is against government, in fact, has nowhere close to an anti-government majority.

This was the state of the Republican Party before Donald Trump. In elections before 2016, the GOP factions have nominated the favorite of the somewhat-conservative faction but on terms that rarely wins the general election. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the only Republican candidate to win the popular vote was George W. Bush in 2004—and he only got 51 percent.

The reason why the GOP nominee fails is simple: there's a growing group of people who are repelled by the issue positions of one or more of these factions. Economic moderates who are social liberals don't want to vote for a nominee beholden in some way to social or anti-government conservatives. These voters are particularly concentrated in former swing states in the Rocky Mountain West and in Virginia. When they've voted Republican, they've voted for a Republican who conservatives consider "squishes"—people who are pro-choice and pro-environment like Mitt Romney was as governor of Massachusetts and Arnold Schwarzenegger was as governor of California. That sort of Republican cannot win the nomination because he doesn't fit with the other constituencies.

WORKING-CLASS WHITES: HOW REPUBLICANS CAN WIN

If all factions of Republicans aren't large enough to win when they are united, to whom do they need to reach out to win national elections? The group that traditionally decides national elections is non-college or blue-collar white working-class voters. This is the group that has been the largest swing group in every election from 1896 to date. This is the constituency that created the Republican majority that lasted from 1896 to 1928 behind a policy of tariffs and social protectionism. This is the group that switched en masse after the Great Depression to give Franklin Roosevelt and the Democrats almost forty years of massive dominance. This "New Deal" coalition ruled America for nearly fifty years. These voters then switched significantly to the Republicans during the Reagan era—but with a catch: they voted for Democrats at the bottoms of tickets and Republicans at the tops of tickets. And when a Democrat could talk their language like Bill Clinton did, they switched back to vote for him. This person traditionally has preferred Democrats so long as the hardcore left wasn't in charge. Fast forward to today: Donald Trump energized this voter. Donald Trump spoke the language that this voter wanted to hear. This voter has been under increasing economic and social pressure over the last twenty years as the de-industrialization of America has hit this group of voters harder than anyone else.

This group of voters is also socially disconnected from the values of the culture and the people who increasingly dominate the media that they consume, whether it's entertainment, news, or even sports. This Democratic-leaning group has become open to voting for Republicans who are not anti-government per se but are willing to accept that government has a role to play in providing a safety net and giving people a hand up in American life. Even as their numbers have declined over the years to fewer than 35%

nationwide, they remain the single largest bloc of voters in key Great Lakes states such as Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, Iowa, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania. Guess where Donald Trump won the presidency?

He didn't do it the way I would have. He did it in a way that castigated other groups in American society and threw potential votes away in the process, but he understood what very few other people did. He understood that the people he was driving away lived in states that weren't going to vote for him anyway. That's how he could lose the popular vote and win in the Electoral College.

This means Republicans now control the House, the Senate, and the presidency with a coalition that's inherently unstable and that relies on voters who don't think of themselves as Republicans and who disagree significantly about many issues. We can see this from polls like one from 2011 conducted by the non-partisan Pew Research Center.¹ Every three years Pew breaks the American electorate into eight to ten different groups according to their demographic characteristics and beliefs. Three groups they identified in 2011 basically comprise the Republican-Trump coalition.

The group they called "staunch conservatives" was basically the religious conservatives and the small government conservatives combined. Another was a group they called "business conservatives," who were basically the somewhat conservatives. The third group they called the "disengaged." This group was disproportionately composed of white people without a college degree who earned under fifty thousand dollars a year.

What you find when you look at the data is that whatever group of issues you talk about, you cannot get all three on the same side. Take free trade. In 2011 the staunch conservatives and the white working class were suspicious of free trade, but the the business conservatives loved it. Take immigration: the white working class and staunch conservatives were suspicious of immigration, while business conservatives were not. Business and staunch conservatives wanted a smaller government, but white working-class voters did not. At a time when federal budget deficits were running at seven percent of GDP, staunch conservatives and business conservatives said the budget deficit was our largest economic problem, but white working-class voters disagreed. They cared more about jobs. These groups also disagreed on the best way to cut the budget. Should we cut Social Security and Medicare? Staunch conservatives were for it. Business conservatives were for it. The white working class were less in favor of it than were "solid liberals." I could go on, but however you work it out, there is never a significant issue where the three sides agree; yet there is no Republican majority unless the three sides agree on something.

What's the solution? The failure to pass an Obamacare replacement plan shows that not only does the Republican leadership not know how to reach the solution, they don't seem to understand that they have a problem. The bills the House and Senate leadership proposed could never bridge the gap between these groups' preferences. Most importantly, they were never able to create a bill that satisfied the three

conservative groups' desires for smaller government with the moderates' and blue-collar whites' desire for subsidized health insurance coverage.

Republicans need to understand who the working-class voters who put Trump into office are. These people voted for Obama twice. These people voted for Gore and Kerry. These people voted for Clinton twice if they were old enough to do so. Yet despite this, the Republican leadership advanced Obamacare replacement bills that would have kicked many of these voters out of health insurance or into plans they didn't want.

BRINGING THE FACTIONS TOGETHER

What happens next? First the GOP needs to understand how its traditional emphasis on budgets and liberty sounds to these voters. Republicans often talk about issues in ways that make others think that when the chips are down, even despite their best inclinations, they will prioritize saving money over saving lives. This core choice alienates moderates and Trump Democrats who might want smaller government but prioritize saving lives over saving money.

The last person who put together these groups in a way that they could get along and get something done was Ronald Reagan. He created a conservatism that was inclusionary, not exclusionary—and he did it at a time when people who were working class never voted Republican because of the legacy of the Great Depression. He told these voters that their cherished social programs were safe. Both as the governor and as president he would not choose lower taxes at the expense of the programs they valued. Even when he talked about things like welfare, he always made clear that you deserved government support if you couldn't support yourself through no fault of your own.

This is the secret sauce that led the predecessors of the Trump Democrats (the Reagan Democrats who lived in the same areas and in the same counties where Trump did well, and who had voted for Democrats for decades before) to come over and give Reagan's Republican Party a chance. Doing this requires that you place a love of the average person at the center of your political creed.

All too often we have a stale debate in this country over questions of power. Should government do more, or should government do less? On one side, we have the stereotypical Republican who says that government should almost never step in because the private sector or charity can do it. On the other hand, we have the Democrats who can often be characterized as saying that government never does anything wrong and if there is a problem, there's nothing that government can't do to solve it. The American middle, and especially the working-class white middle, believes this question doesn't matter. The question they care about is how you make government so that it helps me overcome the obstacles that I can't overcome on my own so that I can go along and achieve the life of my choice.

Ronald Reagan always spoke about government power in this nuanced way even when he was criticizing excessive government activity. Reagan repeatedly said there's no such thing as left or right, there's only up or down. Reagan's philosophy was that Americans want the up party; they don't want the down party. Increasingly Americans, particularly those who are economically and socially stressed, feel that both parties are the down party. They are looking for the up party, and for many they thought Donald Trump would make the Republicans that party.

“How could they think that?” I am sure many of you ask. But consider the data. In 2012, a national exit poll asked voters which of four characteristics is most important in choosing a president.² Seventy-four percent of the voters chose one of three categories—has a vision for the future, is a strong leader, or shares my values. Romney won each of those by between nine and twenty-three points. So, you have 74% choosing one of these three, with Romney winning each category—that gave him a thirteen-point lead and should have made him president. But 21% chose the fourth category, and Romney lost this group by sixty-three points—and that's why President Obama was reelected. This group wanted a president who “cares about people like me.”

Fast forward to 2016. The same national exit poll asked the same question with slightly different categories.³ An impressive 90% of those who wanted an experienced president voted for Clinton, and a substantial 65% of those who wanted a president with good judgement did the same. But among the 39% of voters who wanted someone who could bring change, 82% voted for Trump. But his lead in this large category was not enough to ensure he won the presidency if he lost the fourth category by a large margin. That fourth category was, again, a president who cares about people like me. Fifteen percent chose “cares about people like me” and Trump lost this group by only twenty-three points. He nearly doubled Mitt Romney's standing with this group, and that was the case in every one of the swing states that he won.

Wrap your head around that fact. For a lot of the white working-class voters the only candidate who cared about “people like me” was Donald J. Trump. A Republican Party that can understand that is one that can reunite itself and become a majority party again.

NOTES

1. Pew Research Center, “Beyond Red vs. Blue: Political Typography,” May 4, 2011, <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/legacy-pdf/Beyond-Red-vs-Blue-The-Political-Typology.pdf>.
2. CNN, “President: Full Results: Exit Polls,” Dec. 10, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/election/2012/results/race/president/>.
3. CNN, “Exit Polls,” Nov. 23, 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/election/results/exit-polls>.