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The End Of A Republican Party

Racial and cultural resentment have replaced the party's small government ethos.

By Clare Malone

Filed under 2016 Election

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Legend has it that after leveling Carthage in the Third Punic War, Roman army generals ordered that the city's fields be sown with salt so that they'd lie fallow for years, Roman generals not being particularly well known for their benevolence in victory.

Many Republicans think Donald Trump's nomination is doing roughly the same thing to their party: destroying any chance for growth it once had and leaving the GOP to wither and die on Trump vineyard vines.

"My general sense, looking at this election, is that what we're witnessing here is the end of something much more than the beginning of something," Yuval Levin, editor of the conservative policy journal *National Affairs*, told me recently.

Moments of historical change in the course of a party's life can be difficult to spot. In "Party Ideologies in America, 1828-1996," political scientist John Gerring marks the beginning of the modern Republican Party as Herbert Hoover's shifting campaign rhetoric in 1928 and 1932, when he talked more about the virtues of the American home and family than

hard-tack economics. Hoover's oratory about the progress of the individual being threatened by an overzealous government bureaucracy stuck around for the next eight decades, and the wisdom of generations has helped us discern that this was indeed the start of a new Republican era.

The shock of 2016, though, is just how self-evident the inflection point at which the Republican Party finds itself is; Trump is a one-man crisis for the GOP. The party has been growing [more conservative](#) and less tolerant of deviations from doctrine over the past decades, so what does it mean that a man who has freely eschewed conservative orthodoxy on policy is now the Republicans' standard-bearer?

Many have assumed that adherence to a certain conservative purity was the engine of the GOP, and given the party's demographic homogeneity, this made sense. But re-evaluating recent history in light of Trump, and looking a bit closer at this year's numbers, something else seems to be the primary motivator of GOP voters, something closer to the neighborhood of cultural conservatism and racial and economic grievance rather than a passion for small government.

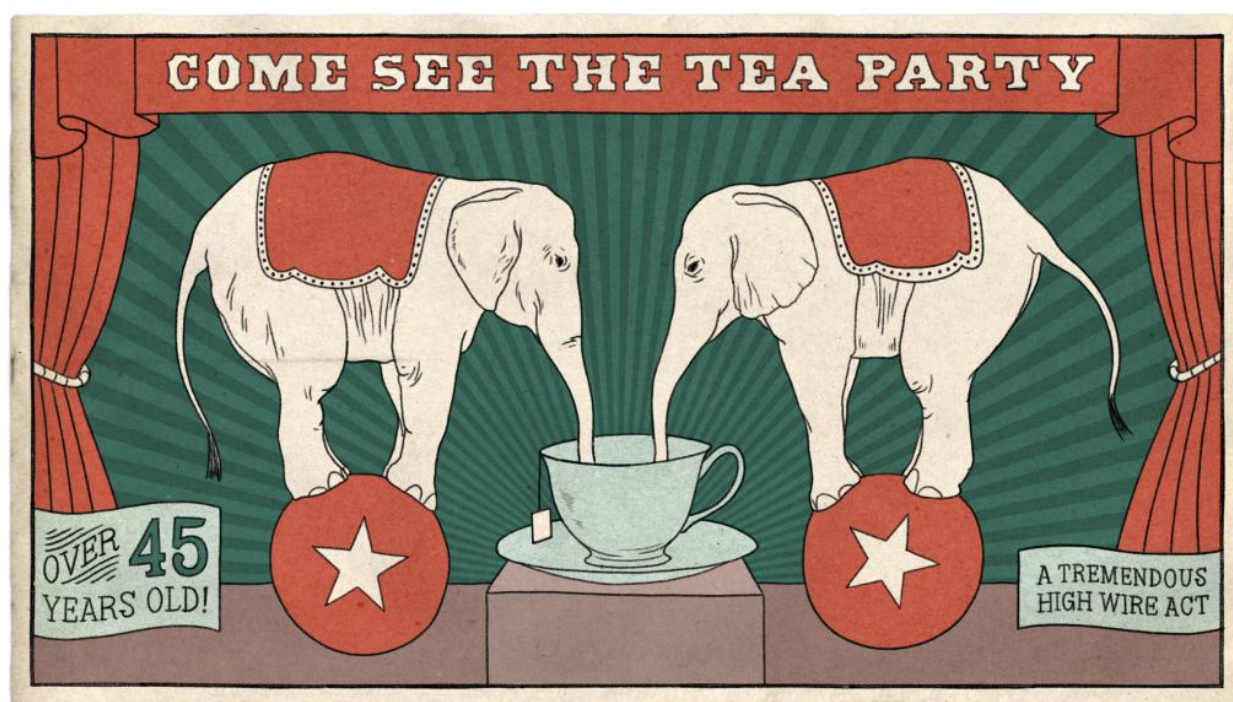
The results of a FiveThirtyEight and SurveyMonkey poll conducted in June¹ found that one of the most indicative variables in determining Republican identification this year was agreement with the statement that the "number of immigrants who come to the United States each year" should "decrease." Trump's campaign kicked off with a speech last [June](#) that labeled Mexican immigrants as the dregs of society — "They're bringing crime, they're rapists," he [said](#) — and has hammered on the immigration issue since, [adding Muslims](#) to the dragnet of groups deemed undesirable in the United States. The election has taken on a distinctly racial tinge, and in doing so, has clarified the motivations of voters somewhat.

Trump's strategy, while winning him the GOP nomination in the short term, has likely only served to compound the long-term demographic and ideological problems the Republican Party has long known it faces. Over the past few decades, the GOP has remained largely white, less educated and older while the numbers of minorities in the country soared, college attainment rose and the millennial generation came of age politically. Alienating the country's growing ranks of minorities is unwise on the sheer face of the numbers, and bad reputations can stick around for years; like sports teams and baldness, our political beliefs are passed down through generations and familial connections.

What's more, the idea of an electorate motivated more by issues of cultural grievance than by the grand ideas of conservatism is a dispiriting notion to Republicans already frustrated by the party's particular pattern of positioning itself as ever beholden to the past. To those Republicans, Reagan hagiography has stunted the GOP: "No one under the age of 51 today was old enough to vote for Reagan when he first ran for president," the authors of the party's 2012 election post-mortem, a reviled document in some corners of the party, wrote. "We sound increasingly out of touch."

Political parties strive to be something greater than the human beings they're comprised of;

they enshrine values and ideologies for the ages. The practical implications of this pursuit are often discussions of tax policy or judicial stances, but these debates are driven by what a certain group believes to be the best, most virtuous way to live life on earth. “The underlying unity of Whig-Republican ideology from Whiggism to Reaganism,” Gerring writes, “can be found in three interrelated values — prosperity, social order and patriotism.” However one chooses to classify the moral and intellectual pillars of the Republican Party, among the questions that surround Trump’s nomination are how a party under his direction — or in the wake of his failed presidential bid — might grapple with conveying Republican values in modern America, how Trumpism fits into the trajectory of the Republican Party, and perhaps the most looming, encapsulating curiosity of all: Where will his rise take it?



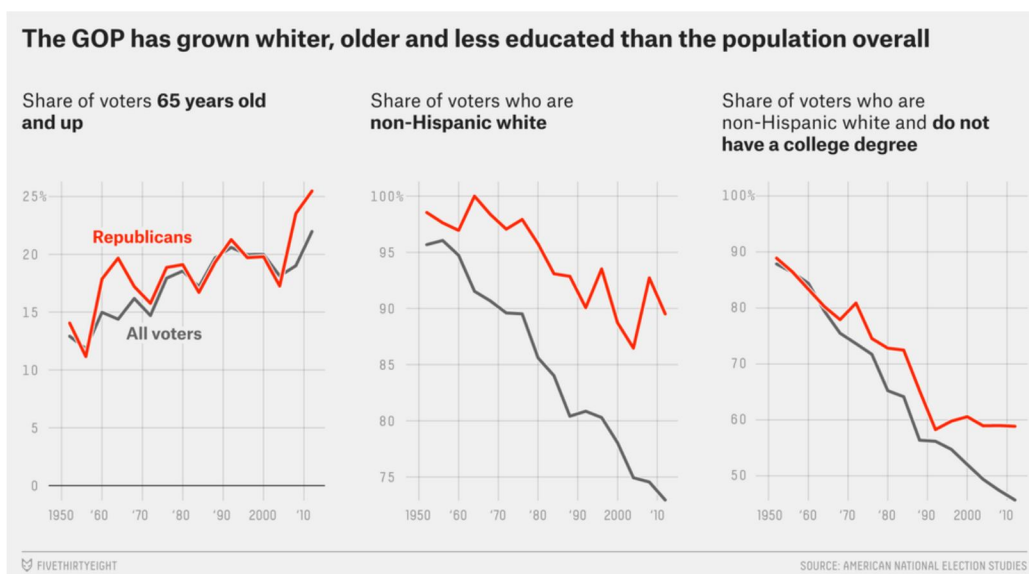
Somewhere in recent years, the GOP’s engagement with modern America and how to best project those values into a nation of 320 million people became dysfunctional. As the country has diversified, the party has remained monochromatic, has grayed, and rather than allowing some birch-like give on shifting cultural norms, has become an unbending oak of ideological purity. The GOP now finds itself lacking an intimate’s ability to criticize productively, given its demographic and cultural divergence from the majority of the country.

Most prominently, as has been said time and again, it is a party of breathtaking whiteness.

“You’re not going to do better than 59 percent,” Stuart Stevens, Mitt Romney’s chief strategist, told me not long ago, citing the percent of the white vote that his candidate got in 2012 while winning 24 states. Ronald Reagan, by comparison, got only 56 percent of the white vote in 1980 but won in a 44-state landslide.

“Now, you can talk about these Reagan Republicans” — at his own mention of a conservative subset of voters some say didn’t turn out for Romney, Stevens stopped to guffaw a little — “I can tell you where to find Reagan Republicans: Go to a cemetery in Oakland County, Michigan. That’s where you find ’em.”

According to the American National Election Studies, the white percentage of the national vote overall has dropped fairly steadily from around 95 percent during the period from 1948 to 1960 to the low 80s by 1992 to 73 percent in 2012.. The Republican party did not keep pace with this change, nor did it do much to win younger voters. 2008 featured a gaping chasm between the over-65 vote and the 18- to 29-year-old vote: There was a 43-point difference between how the two groups voted, with the older crowd going for John McCain by 10 percentage points, even as he lost the overall election by a [7-point margin](#) to Barack Obama, the country’s first black president.



Republicans’ educational attainment has also stalled. While GOP voters had historically won college-educated voters, by 2012, this was clearly not the case.

FiveThirtyEight found, in fact, that the percentage of whites without a college degree has strong explanatory power in determining where Republicans have gained strength since 2000.

Despite its demographic inertia, the Republican Party has not been without its moments of change. The tea party movement, which rose up from the grassroots in 2009, has significantly altered the way the GOP conducts its business. But the party’s “revolution” was led not by young men and women storming the barricades but by the gray-haired masses sitting down in their Adirondack Chairs and fighting to keep things as they have been. According to a [2010 New York Times/CBS News poll](#) of tea party supporters, 75 percent were 45 or older. In keeping with Republican Party trends, the group was also overwhelmingly white, at 89 percent, and only 23 percent had a college degree.

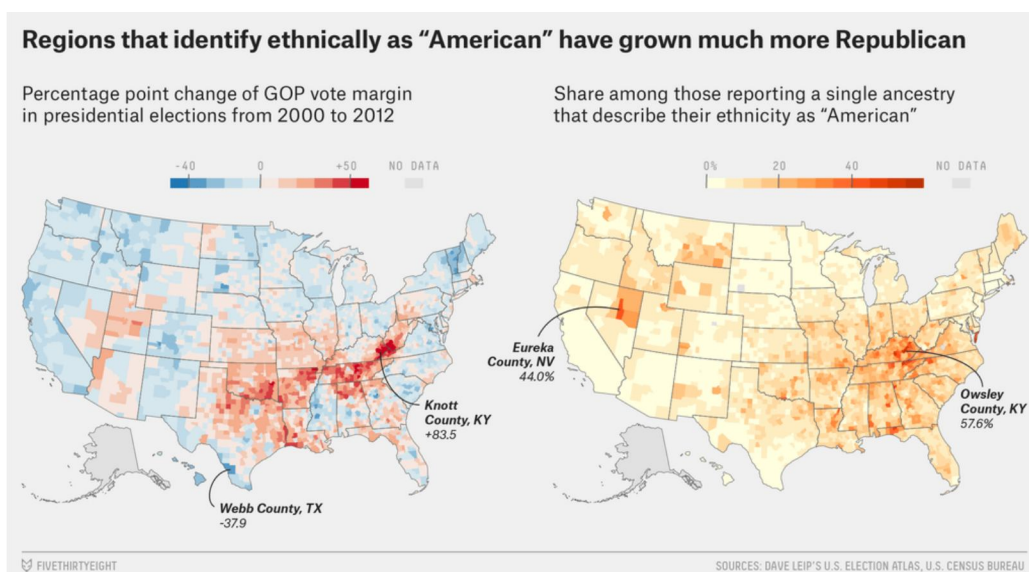
“In 2009, that was the first time I went to a tea party, and I will tell you that the vast majority

of people that I interacted with at tea parties at that time were older,” Ben Howe, a frequent contributor to the conservative blog Redstate.com, said. “They were, you know, ‘I just want to take my country back.’”

While the tea party was greeted by some as a sign of a reinvigorated party, it didn’t help to bring the GOP more in line with the country at large. Most Americans didn’t see eye-to-eye with the movement; at the height of its strength in 2010, only **32 percent** of the country supported it and that number had dropped to 17 percent by 2015. Moreover, elements of the racially motivated politics that have characterized the Trump presidential campaign were evident at these gatherings, according to Howe.

“Every once in a while, somebody would come with a Confederate flag and people would stand there and point at it and call them ‘liberal plants’ and things like that,” he said.

In that way, the tea party wasn’t new. Something real has been percolating over the past decade in the Republican base when it comes to race and identity. When looking at the change in the county-by-county vote from 2000 to 2012, one of the most predictive variable for a place becoming more Republican has been the number of people ethnically identifying as “American,” not whether or not a person believes in smaller government or lower taxes. States such as Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia, where a plurality of people identified in the **2000 Census** as “American,” are among those that have trended the most Republican since 2000.



Howe’s theory for the racial animus of Trump supporters boils down to simple attrition: “Everybody who was reasonable seems to have gone home in 2012,” he said. Romney’s loss in 2012 discouraged many of the once-energized fiscal conservative activists.

“This isn’t the most artful way to say it, but it’s like, where do you go when the only people who seem to agree with you on taxes hate black people?” Howe laughed ruefully. “I think what you do is you say, ‘Well, I may lose but I can’t align myself with them.’”

But instead, Howe said, he made moral compromises he regrets.

“There are some things that I don’t have core values about, that I can be negotiable on, compromise on. But then there are other things that I can’t budge on,” he said. “I think I thought I had to budge on some things: ‘Yeah, this guy talking to me right now just said he agrees with my taxes and also we need to get that Kenyan out of office.’ Why did I stand there and say, ‘Yeah’? You know? I shouldn’t have done that. I should’ve said, ‘Wait, what? No, that’s stupid. You’re stupid. Don’t be stupid.’”

When I spoke with Tim Miller, Jeb Bush’s former communications director, soon after Trump won the Indiana primary and the nomination, he wasn’t sure what the party might look like after November, much less four or eight years down the line.

There were potential paths back to a more mainstream party line, he theorized, including an economic downturn during a Clinton presidency, making Republicans more appealing by comparison. Miller wasn’t much comforted by that, though.

“I think another very real potential right now — why it’s important that people in the party speak out against Donald Trump and against Trumpism — is that the Republican Party moves to a period of minority status,” he said. “Where it’s essentially a party that’s driven by white grievances and by white — not racial politics, but a set of white identity politics.”

On a recent muggy early morning, as suit- and flag-pin-wearing men parked their bicycles in front of Longworth House Office Building in Washington, six members of the Freedom Caucus gathered in Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan’s mahogany-paneled office. “Morning Joe” was on mute in the background and the group of ultra-conservative allies, most of whom came to power during the tea party wave and whose notoriety grew after their starring role in the ouster of House Speaker John Boehner, chattered loudly as they waited for the morning’s full contingent to arrive.

Along with Jordan, there was Mark Meadows of North Carolina, Mick Mulvaney of South Carolina, Scott Perry from Pennsylvania, Raul Labrador of Idaho and David Brat, a Virginia freshman who surprised the political world when he successfully defeated former House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in a 2014 primary. The gathering came four days after Trump’s twitter account posted a six-pointed star sitting atop a pile of money, widely deemed to be [anti-Semitic](#), and the day after FBI director James Comey [recommended](#) that Hillary Clinton not be criminally charged for her misuse of government email. The race, as always, was moving apace.

Made up of unyielding conservatives, the Freedom Caucus reaction to Trump has been closely watched — the group is emblematic of all that the core of the Republican Party had supposedly become in recent years; strict constitutionalists guided by the notion of America as a nation of traditional Judeo-Christian values. Many caucus members had been hesitant to endorse the presumptive nominee and some have been tepid in their backing.

Meadows, formerly for Cruz, said that while he’d support the eventual Republican nominee,

full-throated backing for this year's candidate seemed a bridge too far.

Others expressed more clarity on their candidate stance.

"The Gary Johnson thing is fun," Mulvaney said. But, "if you're really in the business, there are two choices: Hillary or Trump."

It wasn't particular policies of the Manhattan businessman's that attracted him, Mulvaney said, but rather the relatively blank canvas that Trump might bring to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

"He paints with a broad brush and is working on the macro issues and when you get to issues of policy, I think the center of power shifts to the Republicans in the House," he said.

Jordan, in turn, summed up what might be seen as the broader impetus behind the caucus's reluctant backing of Trump.

"Seventy percent of the country thinks we're in decline, 60 percent of the country thinks their children will be worse off, and 80 percent," he said, "think that this town is rigged against them."²

How angry are you about the way things are going in the country today?

	REPUBLICANS		DEMS.
	PRO-TRUMP	ANTI-TRUMP	
Not	3%	14%	15%
Not Very	7	23	19
Somewhat	39	50	47
Very	52	14	19

Survey conducted June 2-8, 2016, of 1,492 Democrats, 104 anti-Trump Republicans and 1,059 pro-Trump Republicans

SOURCE: SURVEYMONKEY

Many elected officials in the GOP are, like the Freedom Caucus, trying to empathize with their constituents' support of Trump, trying to feel the pain of the electorate and understand why the businessman might ease it or at the very least, provide an outlet for anxiety.

In addition to dissatisfaction with the state of immigration and rounding off what might be called the trifecta of cultural grievance, the

FiveThirtyEight/SurveyMonkey poll found

that among the top indicators of Trump support were feelings of anger at the country's direction and a sense that things would be worse for the next generation.

Would you like to see the number of immigrants to the U.S. increase, decrease or stay the same?

	REPUBLICANS		
	PRO-TRUMP	ANTI-TRUMP	DEM.
Decrease	76%	21%	26%
Stay the same	21	61	52
Increase	4	17	22

These dissipated feelings bear out when it comes to the issue of free trade: More Republicans than Democrats, the survey found, were against free trade, with 47 percent of GOP voters saying it was a bad thing for the economy compared with 28 percent of Democrats who felt the same way.

According to New York Rep. Chris Collins,

Survey conducted June 2-8, 2016, of 1,492 Democrats, 104 anti-Trump Republicans and 1,059 pro-Trump Republicans

SOURCE: SURVEYMONKEY

trade was one of the main reasons that he became the [first member of Congress to support Trump](#), soon after his initial choice, Jeb Bush, dropped out of the race.

Collins's district is not far from Buffalo, a city whose industrial powers have been in decline for decades.

"I've always been on board the same page as Donald from a trade standpoint," he told me. But Collins has had a number of policy differences with his candidate, including on Trump's marquee issue of immigration and the proposal that 11 million illegal immigrants be deported. He brushed this aside, though; what would be a not-insignificant complication in any other election year — outright denial that a nominee's policy plan would ever work — was explained away as a tick of management style.

Do you think free trade agreements are generally good or bad for the U.S. economy?

	REPUBLICANS		DEMS.
	PRO-TRUMP	ANTI-TRUMP	
Bad	50%	20%	28%
No difference	22	26	29
Good	28	55	43

Survey conducted June 2-8, 2016, of 1,492 Democrats, 104 anti-Trump Republicans and 1,059 pro-Trump Republicans

SOURCE: SURVEYMONKEY

"A CEO like Donald Trump raises issues, says, 'Here's what I think,' and then starts the debate," Collins said. "Politicians don't do things like that."

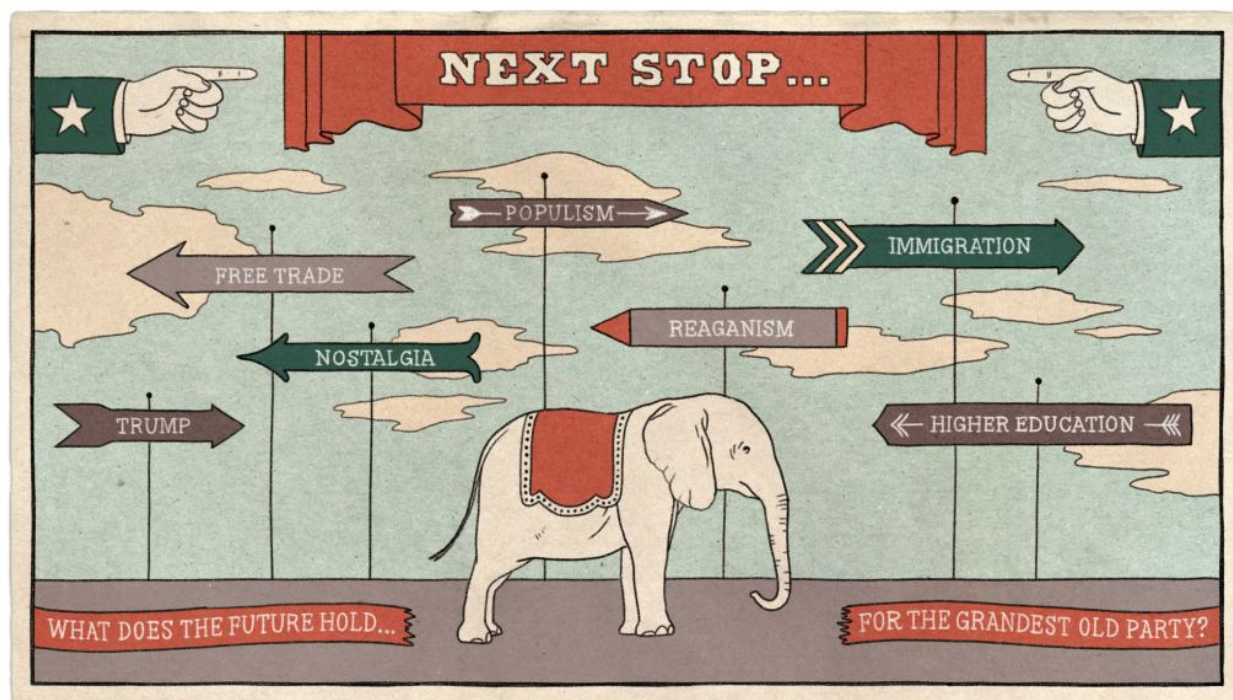
"You've already seen he's moved off of some of the Muslim comments. I'm glad to see that," he said. "I'm convinced that when the dust settles on the immigration, we're not going have a line of buses putting 11 million people on them."

That even the party's most conservative members are falling in line behind the

unorthodox candidate — although, many, like Labrador, who is Latino, [denounced Trump's comments](#) about a Mexican-American judge — should perhaps not come as a surprise. Most of the #NeverTrump movement has been situated in the shrinking centrist pockets of the party. An [analysis](#) of elected officials and Trump support by FiveThirtyEight contributor Daniel Nichanian shows that outside of "the most moderate tier of Republicans," backing of the presumptive nominee is relatively consistent across the rest of the party's ideological spectrum.

"Support for Trump does dip in the most conservative tier," Nichanian writes. "But only slightly."

This coalescing around the presumptive nominee from most corners of the party leads to questions about how, whether he wins or loses, Trumpism will entwine permanently with the GOP, perhaps making it a more populist party, one that softens on issues like free trade. Or perhaps those holdouts on the most conservative tier in the party who have not backed Trump might press with all the more urgency for hewing to the conservative line, the pillars of ideology.



“I have probably been predicting, for nearly 10 years, that I thought the two-party system comes apart well inside the next 10 or 15 years. I expected that you’d have a diminishing of the political parties and the rise of people who bring their own brand to the process,” freshman Sen. Ben Sasse of Nebraska told me recently. “I didn’t expect it to happen in 2016, but I did think it would happen in 2020 or 2024, at least, 2028.”

A former college president and a historian by training, Sasse, 44, is a graduate of Harvard and Yale whose profile skyrocketed in the wake of a [Facebook post](#) he penned lodging his official protest against Trump as the party’s candidate. Since then, he’s become the pinup fantasy for some in the #NeverTrump movement, the sort of ideal independent candidate to run against Trump and Clinton.

The infatuation with Sasse is tied to the question of what comes next for the GOP. In the eyes of many, as the country continues its rapid diversification and integration into a technologically driven economy, there is a need to groom a coalition of next-generation leaders.

Young, tan and a bit floppy-haired, Sasse looks the part of a rising political star, but he doesn’t talk like one all the time, tweeting both about [“the disintermediation of media,”](#) his 14-year-old daughter’s character-building weeks on a cattle ranch, and talking to political reporters about the very destruction of our American political paradigm.

“We have before us the task of trying to create a society of lifelong learners because people’s jobs are going to expire every three years forevermore at a pace that’s going to continue to accelerate. And so what’s the Republican’s Party solution to that? What’s the Democratic Party’s solution to that?” Sasse said. “The Democrats have a really crappy product — they’re

trying to sell more central planning and more monopolistic rule of experts in the age of Uber — and Republicans, no one knows what we stand for.”

Yuval Levin, whose recent book, “The Fractured Republic,” tackles this idea of where the Republican Party might go in a more decentralized, economically and demographically diversified country, has made a career out of thinking through what path the party might take, editing the quarterly policy review, *National Affairs*.

Involvement in policy areas that help Republicans seem more empathetic and in-the-muck with working communities and families seems to be a key consideration, along with the fact, according to Levin, that localized actions are where the party’s strengths lie.

“The biggest opportunities are in welfare and higher education, in part because those are policy areas that we largely thought of as being in the purview of states and localities,” he told me. But for Levin, the party’s modes of communication are just as important as policy.

“The way for conservatives to approach the public is to first ask people, ‘How do you think problems get solved? Is it by putting power in the hands of experts who have the answers or is it by putting resources in the hands of people who need solutions?’” he said. “We haven’t talked that way to the public, so I don’t blame the public for having no idea that this is what Republicans have done.”

Republican progress has been retarded by wistfulness for the past, a country song-inclination to long for the way things used to be.

In his book, Levin levels criticism at the narrative Americans on both the left and right have woven for themselves over the last 70 years.

“We really have almost no self-understanding of our country in the years since World War II that is not in some fundamental way a baby-boomer narrative,” Levin writes, words that hold particular resonance in an election year where the major party nominees are 68 and 70.

Nostalgia for the way things used to be — heavy industry, vibrant social safety net institutions — “is why younger Americans so often find themselves re-enacting memories they do not actually possess, and why our nation increasingly behaves like a retiree,” he writes.

Sasse, Utah’s Mike Lee, Paul Ryan of Wisconsin and Tom Cotton of Arkansas are Republican officials who Levin thinks might be able to help revive GOP policy, “partially because they’re a little more at home in the 21st century,” he said. “It’s also because they’re a little more free of the particular kind of Reagan nostalgia that holds a lot of the party captive.”

When I asked the Freedom Caucus members how they would respond to Levin’s argument that the party had grown too nostalgic, too Reagan-centric, the room crackled.

“We’re supposed to respond to this guy? How many followers does he have?” David Brat asked incredulously. There was silence for a moment; it was difficult to discern whether he

meant Twitter followers or policy acolytes.

“He’s actually a pretty smart guy,” Labrador finally said.

“Well, you can be smart, but does he have any followers?” Brat asked. “A lot of people at Harvard are smart, but they don’t have any followers.”

“I don’t disagree,” Labrador said to me, turning back to the original question. “I gave a speech about Ted Cruz, and I said, ‘A lot of people are saying that Ted Cruz is the next Reagan.’ And I said, ‘I hope he’s not, I hope he’s the next Ted Cruz because I want to make sure that we look forward.’”

“That’s a good one,” someone murmured approvingly.

Brat was sticking to his guns, though. “I totally disagree. It’s not time to move past Reagan. Reagan stands for something, for a positive America.”

Division within the party, not just on Reagan’s place in its communion of saints, is likely to continue even after November’s election, at least the way Republican pollster Kristen Soltis Anderson sees it.

“There are some folks who will say, ‘Oh, well, won’t this have finally purged the party of its demons? Won’t they be tired of losing and finally, they’ll do all that stuff in the GOP autopsy and everything’ll be great?’”

That, she said, was “fantasy land.”

So too in her eyes was the notion that all Republicans needed to do to win was turn out conservative whites that stayed at home during 2012, the “[missing white voters](#)” electoral thesis.

“What I think was flawed about that theory is it assumed that those missing white voters were all conservative Republicans,” she said. “We have an awful lot of voters in our party who aren’t particularly interested in shutting down the government or slashing government spending, including entitlements. We have a lot of voters in our party, every time the argument was made, ‘Well, Donald Trump is not conservative enough,’ they kind of shrugged their shoulders.”

If Trump lost, Soltis Anderson said — which seems at this point, [not an unreasonable possibility](#) — the factions in the party would only become more entrenched. It would not just be the Trump supporters vs. the Never Trumps; instead, Never Trump would be pitted against Never Trump in a civil war of the moral resistance. Lacking a common enemy, they would revert to their differences.

“On the one hand, you have the autopsy folks, right?” she said, referring to those who concur with the findings of a 2012 report that said, among other things, that the GOP should reach

out to minority voters. “You have the people that look at Donald Trump and they go, ‘He’s alienating Latino voters, he’s doing damage to the brand, he’s looking backwards, not forwards, he’s the opposite of what we needed.’”

The other Never Trump faction — “the Ted Cruz folks, the conservative purists,” as Soltis Anderson put it — would disagree with the diagnosis of why Trump was bad for the party. “Their main argument with Trump is not that he’s mean to Latinos; their main argument with Trump is that he’s not really a conservative, he’s not really one of us,” she said. “When all is said and done, those two Never Trump forces are going to blame each other for his existence.”

The prospect that the GOP leaders wouldn’t even be able to agree on why Trump — arguably the worst crisis the modern party has experienced — was even a crisis to begin with, seemed to say it all.

“There is no happy ending to this story,” she said.

CORRECTION (July 18, 10:15 a.m.): An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of a Republican pollster. It is Kristen Soltis Anderson, not Kristin.

CORRECTION (July 19, 3:30 p.m.): A previous version of the second chart in this article incorrectly described the data being shown. The chart shows the percentage point change in the GOP’s county-by-county margin of victory, not vote share, and covers 2000 to 2012, not 2008 to 2012.

VIDEO: Clare Malone at the Republican National Convention

Footnotes

1. The data from this survey presented here has been weighted for age, race, sex, education, region and voter registration status using the Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Current Population Survey to reflect the demographic composition of the United States. [^]

2. Jordan's numbers aren't exactly right, but they're in the ballpark. ^