

The Path Forward for Republicans Is Both Conservative and Populist

By [Michael Needham](#)

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The 2016 Republican Primary has been anything but predictable and, at times, it has been downright ugly. At a time when the vast majority of the American people feel life is tough, it is getting tougher, but nobody in Washington cares, the environment is ripe for Republicans to present an inspiring alternative to the failed agenda of the left. Yet, rather than showing this path forward, the Republican Party appears to be in chaos.

How did we get here? And, more importantly, what is the best way forward?

If there's anything we can say definitively about the 2016 primary, it is that the establishment lane to the Republican nomination is nonexistent. It ran into a cliff of unsustainable debt, neglect of important cultural issues, and an unwillingness to stand and fight for people eager to have politicians fight for them.

Passing \$19 trillion of debt onto our children and grandchildren is an immoral thing to do -- but it is doubly wrong when we are not even certain we are passing on to them a better opportunity than we inherited. Yet, for many Americans, that is what we are doing and it is brought to you by a bipartisan political environment so concerned with itself and maintaining its position of influence that it has been unwilling to fight to reverse policies that haven't worked.

Our immigration system is failing our nation -- it does a disservice to those who obey the rule of law by coming here the right way and poses tremendous fiscal costs as it interacts with a generous and unsustainable welfare state -- yet our nation's establishment class wants to paper over its fundamental flaws with a blanket amnesty.

Months after the Supreme Court redefined marriage across the nation, religious liberty is under attack as Christians are told by the state they must personally violate their deeply held beliefs or lose their businesses under threat of unpayable fines.

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Workers struggle to pay the bills as insurance premiums increase, the price of food goes up, and wages remain stagnant, yet the top legislative priority of the Washington establishment last year was providing free money for Wall Street through reauthorizing the Export-Import Bank -- an agency few have ~~of~~ heard of and whose absence would go unnoticed on Main Street.

The establishment lane is gone, and good riddance. It is the lane that got our nation and our party into this mess.

The path forward, however, will be difficult and can only be navigated by leaders who understand the valid feelings of disenfranchisement so many in our nation feel. Such leaders must channel those passions into a cause worthy of the hopes and dreams of citizens they hope will follow them. This is what statesmanship looks like.

What's left in the Republican Party are largely two lanes. One lane is the traditional constitutional conservative lane for those eager to enact policies that will make life better for all Americans. We know it is free enterprise, not crony capitalism, that has made America great in the past and can make her great again in the future. One cannot have free enterprise without a strong culture of conservatism that understands it is the little platoons of society -- our families, friendships, church groups and other civic involvements -- that provide the true compassion necessary to live in a free society. And all of this is only possible with a strong and engaged America abroad that keeps us safe at home to devote our lives and energies to our families, businesses and communities.

The other lane is a populist lane that has important and valid grievance. It is the lane that says enough is enough with a corrupt system of politics that works for the well-connected but doesn't care about the real heroes in America. The police officer who walks his beat -- risking his life and, today, his reputation if he makes the wrong decision in an impossibly perilous situation -- and goes home to coach Little League deserves politicians who will fight for him.

Bob Biblestone, a contractor in Eastern Ohio, explains how life feels today for working Americans. "What I guess most frustrates me about politicians is that they don't understand that, for me and most people that I know, work is part of our culture. When they continue to make it harder for us to find ways to work, we eventually hit a boiling point," Biblestone told Salena Zito of the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review. "We don't fit in with Washington. We have done absolutely everything that we were supposed to do all of our lives and our values are looked at as backwards." It is tough to disagree with a word Biblestone says.

In the American context, populism without conservative principles has led to expansions of government power as those with legitimate anxiety have their needs met by the security of a government blanket. For the last several years, those of us in the conservative reform movement

have tried to force the party leadership to recognize the danger of leaving the populist lane unaddressed.

Nobody understood the importance of channeling populism with a deep commitment to principle better than Ronald Reagan. In his first inaugural address, he committed to all Americans: "Your dreams, your hopes, your goals are going to be the dreams, the hopes, and the goals of this administration, so help me God," he promised. The reality the leadership of the Republican Party has refused to face is that today most working Americans feel their elected officials don't hear them from the quiet car on the Acela to a New York City fundraiser.

To point out the obvious, tremendous energy and votes obviously lie in this second, populist lane of the party. It has fueled Donald Trump's candidacy as he has pointed out that our country's politicians are corrupt -- so many of them are; that they cut bad deals -- almost all of them are; that too many Americans feel unheard -- sadly, in our political process, they are.

The path forward for the Republican Party is to unite these two lanes. To have a conservative, populist party that treats all Americans like heroes, gives them the opportunity to spread their wings and soar as far as their abilities will take them, and provides favoritism to nobody just because they are well-connected. Sen. Ted Cruz in particular has led that effort during his time in the Senate.

When it comes to uniting the conservative and populist lanes, some on the right have expressed reservations about the party's front-runner. Many of their concerns are valid, but it would be foolish to simply leave it there. If Donald Trump is the Republican nominee, he will need to lead an effort that is not only populist but deeply committed to advancing a conservative agenda. If he does, he will find a conservative movement eager to work with him on this project. If he does not, he will tear the party in two.

Mr. Trump has made important commitments -- to completely repeal Obamacare, to get rid of Common Core and to appoint a replica of Justice Antonin Scalia to the Supreme Court. Conservatives who ignore these commitments are unfair to Trump and ignore the opportunity to build on these commitments.

At the same time, Trump's critics raise issues that are deeply troubling and beg the question of whether he truly seeks to be the leader to unite the lanes. We laid out a number of these concerns last year when Heritage Action published our Presidential Platform Review. For example, on the issue of growth, Trump's past support for confiscatory taxes and current support for massive tariffs, which would hurt American consumers, are troubling. On life, his repeated defenses of the "good parts" of Planned Parenthood miss the point of this pro-life priority.

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Trump's optimism for making America great again is laudable, and his contempt for the feckless Washington establishment is well placed. But he tends to oversimplify the solution. The idea that all our nation needs to solve its woes is a leader who is smart and strong is an unsatisfactory prescription and at best would only temporarily treat the ills that afflict Washington.

Nobody expects a newcomer to politics to be flawless in his articulation of policy proposals and, for anybody, the first task of an election is to win so one has the chance to enact good policy. Trump has shown his personal political gifts coupled with the energy in the populist lane have been sufficient to get him into the pole position of the Republican primary.

The future of the country, however, is best served by a party that doesn't just live in the populist lane but seeks to channel populism towards conservative ends. This is what a successful Republican presidency will look like. We know it is the type of project Cruz would lead as nominee and we hope it is one Trump would lead also. Regardless of whom the voters choose, we will be there as a resource, provider of accountability, and standard-bearer for the principles that our country was founded on and must look to going forward.

Michael A. Needham is the chief executive officer of Heritage Action for America (heritageaction.com).