

Trump – Selling Empathetic/Populist Conservatism

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The Conservative Ideology – The Foundation of Trump's Policies

For Hyper Conservatives, the role of government is limited to assuring the individual rights [freedom] of its citizens and to providing security for its citizens from external threats [military defense and intelligence agencies] and internal crimes [law enforcement – FBI, police and judicial and penal systems]. Standard Conservatives in addition typically support a second layer of services and facilities: fire protection and ambulance, transportation security and infrastructure, customs, public service infrastructure, water and sewer systems, postal service, and public records. Finally there are Moderate Conservatives who also support: public tax collection; public education and libraries; public transportation; public works; licensing agencies; and, reluctantly, social security. For most Conservatives all other services including public health agencies and programs – Medicare – Medicaid; land use agencies; planning and building departments; workman's compensation; food safety agencies; environmental protection agencies, public utility commissions; public land ownership and management departments; public historical museums; public parks; fish and wildlife agencies; and especially public assistance agencies serving the needs of children, the disabled, the indigent and the poor are regarded as unwarranted intrusions and/or welfare and more properly left to the individual to address.

The Conservative ideology is centered on the importance of individual freedom and individualistic values where individuals are responsible for their own situation and success, which is attributed to the combination of their character and their level of industry. In this view, community and social values are strictly secondary and arise among free and successful individuals at their discretion, and not as independent needs and goals.

In the Conservative view, social responsibility for those less advantaged is an optional matter more properly left to the charitable view of each individual or group. It is not the appropriate duty or role of government to provide social programs to address situations of inequality, because such inequality is assumed to be the result of a failing of character and/or industry in the individual or group that finds itself in poor circumstances. If the individual has the chance – however remote – of legitimately changing their socio-economic condition for the better, then it is their responsibility alone to take advantage of that opportunity. And in America, Conservatives believe that all citizens have this opportunity. This is true even when this point of view would require parents living in an inner city slum to know it is critical 1) to pay for their child to attend a nurturing day care facility and nursery school, 2) to pay for and provide nutritious foods, 3) to provide and pay for access to quality health care, 4) to supply consistent motivation and guidance to their child

to succeed in education even in circumstances where the parent is uneducated and the education is of a poor quality and devalued by the child's surrounding peers, 5) to protect their child from gangs and street violence even though the parent(s) have to work full time, 6) to keep their teenage daughters from becoming pregnant and their sons from being arrested for juvenile crimes when these conditions are common in the surrounding community, etc. And it does not matter if the parent is single and can only be home in the evening after struggling all day in a minimum wage job to just make it economically day to day.

From the Conservative perspective, it is not the proper role of government or the community to provide assistance – almost regardless of the individual's circumstances. It is for the family to look after itself, and if the family is not able and the family does not have access to other resources in friends or a church community, then the person must take the consequences. And Conservatives hold to this view, in spite of the facts that: 1) technology in conjunction with outsourcing have been squeezing wages and generally reducing the availability of good jobs for 40 years, 2) the extended family is largely a thing of the past given the high degree of mobility in America – leaving the nuclear family to make it on its own, 3) half of all marriages now end in divorce – leaving the spouses to fend for themselves and any children involved to be parented, at best, “across town,” 4) in circumstances where marriage sustains, both partners are now having to work to provide the resources that one wage earner was able to supply 40 years ago – leaving children either “farmed out” to costly daycare or “afloat” after school in the community, 5) nearly half of all families are now led by a single parent who is very often stressed out and constantly on the edge of insolvency, and all of this while observing a supposedly “recovered” American economy where prosperity is enjoyed almost exclusively by the top 5%, who have the capital resources to invest in the world economy.

Trump Declarations – Empathy vs. Policy

1) Equal Access for All to Quality Education and Economic Opportunity Regardless of Age, Sex, Race, Ethnicity, or Religion

This amounts to a commitment at the individual level to make the American Dream available to all; but without any indication of how it will be achieved, at what cost, or how this cost will be paid. This “compassionate,” “empathetic” position is offered without any embarrassment over the fact that what is proposed for the rest of the socio-economic-political system undermines achieving this empathetic, egalitarian goal. Trump's claim, “I am your voice,” has no basis when we look at Trump's actual policy proposal complex.

2) Abolish “Obama Care”

Obama Care can certainly be improved, but the usual Conservative alternative is just to diminish the role of government and increase the role of the private insurance companies. This is the system we had before Obama Care and that system generated the highest health care and prescription costs for Americans among all developed nations together with the least coverage for those most in need and least able to pay. Under Obama Care, 20 million additional “average Joes” are at least covered regardless of their health status and at a cost that is affordable in relation to income. Take Obama Care away and what happens to the declared Trump empathy for the health of the middle class?

3) America First, Renegotiate Trade Agreements to Get a Better Deal for the U.S., Close the Borders, Restrict Immigration, NATO Treaty Commitment?

These pronouncements are all a form of economically and socially driven isolationism in a world that has become more and more interconnected. Such proposals assume America can impose its will to its advantage on other countries – worldwide. But a collective international counter response could isolate American markets and bring on a national depression. Such economic and social isolationism is very risky and, in the bombastic style of the pronouncements, represents conservative populism at its worst. And without sufficient numbers of “immigrants,” who is going to support our aging country and do all those “menial” jobs that Americans refuse to take? If implemented, these actions proposed by Trump would more than likely put the “average American Joe” at further risk of loss.

4) Get Tough, Go Get the “Perpetrators” – Unilateral Military Response to Threats to America, Together with an Unrestrained Law and Order Crackdown on Internal Unrest/Protest/Violence

As offered, these pronouncements constitute an exclusively defensive and reactionary policy unrestrained by the nature of the circumstances. Such an aggressive policy comes with a proposed vast increase in the military and police budgets – coming from where? In its effort to police the world, the United States defense budget is already equal to the combined defense budgets of the next nine countries with the highest defense outlays [includes China and Russia]. And this is not enough, even though U.S. military spending is 40% of the worldwide total and 32% of U.S. annual expenditures at \$1.165 trillion!! In addition, investment in the military has minimal positive carry over to the rest of the economy! Apart from breaking the bank, this policy commits America to the exercise of absolute military and police power, which is inappropriate and dangerous in a world of significant nuclear powers and a highly armed citizenry. The suggested knee jerk, unilateral

international and internal application of power only broadens the target put first on the back of America internationally and second on its law enforcement agents internally. In the otherwise Conservative agenda to reduce revenue, more money for the military and police means less money to support social services that assist the middle class and the poor. Where is the “empathy” for the average American in this plan? Is this the best way to make America Safe and Secure, or, like the George W. Bush invasion of Iraq, does it just motivate more jihadist based attacks and promote more internal conflict?

5) Anti-Immigrant, Anti-Muslim, Anti-Refugee

Trump's pronouncements along this line are in direct conflict with his empathetic and inclusive claims in #1. They are attractive to mostly frustrated white male citizens [with support from white supremacists – raising racist concerns] as part of the solution for the economic and security woes/fears of this constituency. This populist tactic amounts to classic projection – avoid the real source of the problem and attribute it to the “other.” The problem is not American worldwide economic and cultural imperialism or America's support for Saudi Arabia – the primary exporter of radical Islamic fundamentalism. The problem is not America's support for and identification with Israel in spite of its persistent expansionist behavior with respect to Palestinian [Islamic] territory. The problem is not America's military invasion and occupation of Islamic countries where it has forced regime change and attempted to impose a unified federal form of democratic government on societies traditionally defined and structured by ethnic, tribal and/or religious criteria.

Instead, the problem is attributed to the symptoms – radical Islamic terrorists, refugees fleeing destabilized Middle East nations, and desperate Central American immigrants who are painted as criminals or competitors for middle class jobs. This is simplistic populism – find a scapegoat and avoid having to consider what America has done to invite the problems to begin with! Try the “shoe on the other foot.” We know how Americans responded when the British were our “occupiers” and tried to impose their will on us. Were we freedom fighters or terrorists? Depends on your perspective!! Conservatives like Trump are arrogantly sure of their singular good vs. evil perspective when it comes to the very complex situation in the Middle East. Such simplistic views put the “average Joe” at risk to go to war and perhaps die, and at a minimum have to foot the bill for American interventionism.

6) Huge Tax Reduction [Anti-Tax] and Deregulation for Business – to Stimulate Economic Growth and Promote Jobs for the Middle Class

Make America Great Again, like Conservatism in general, is largely grounded in an economic policy to free business to grow with the assumption that the middle class will benefit secondarily in wage and job growth. Unfortunately, history demonstrates

that – especially in the modern period of the world economy – the supply side [trickle down] approach to support the middle class is minimally effective. This anti-tax and deregulation program is always initially sponsored by increasing the national debt with the contention by its Conservative promoters that increased revenues from expanding business will rapidly offset the initial revenue losses. But this very rarely happens, so the middle class ends up paying disproportionately to support the long term increased interest on the national debt. And national debt is supposed to be anathema to Conservatives! What actually occurs under this tax reduction and deregulation plan is that the corporate and financial investment zones are the major beneficiaries along with the wealthy, while the environment and the citizenry suffer.

Deregulation of the financial industry was the primary cause of the Great Recession, and yet here we are with Conservatives promoting another round of deregulation! And since Conservatives like Trump love to deny the role of human activity in climate change in spite of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, it comes as no surprise that Trump wants to deregulate the fossil fuel industry and expand development of America's fossil fuels reserves. This kind of short term, exclusively economically derived thinking in the long term puts not just the economic prospects, but the very survival prospects, for the children of middle class Americans at great risk.

When tax reduction and deregulation are paired with a large increase in the military budget [proposed in #4] and when revenues do not materialize as predicted – usually the case, this approach devolves to become the excuse to defund social programs, further damaging the middle class and promoting poverty. So, in multiple ways this proposal from Trump actually amounts to a formula for increasing inequality and further suppressing the middle class. This is the Conservative brand of empathy!

Deregulation of business and defunding government through tax reduction allows competitive economics and money [free enterprise] to be the primary drivers of society, while ignoring the negative social, political, infrastructural, and ecological consequences. We have seen these negative results before and had to address them by implementing regulations at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century [corporate monopolies – Anti-Trust Act], and again in the 1930's [minimal margin investing and the Great Depression – Glass-Steagall Act], and again in the 1970s [industrial pollution – Endangered Species, Clean Water and Clean Air Acts;], and again in the 1980s [inadequate liquidity and the Saving and Loan Scandal – Financial Reform Act], and again in 2008 in the Great Recession [inadequate liquidity and high risk derivatives in the deregulated investment banking and mortgage industry – Dodd-Frank Reform Act]; and again in 2010 [corporations as citizens and money as speech – Supreme Court Citizens United Decision freeing PACs and corporate spending in elections; awaits reversal].

Regulations should always be under review for their effectiveness and adjusted as needed, but deregulation per se is rarely justified. And, as history shows, deregulation mostly just a) invites high risk loophole hunting to maximize the benefits for a privileged few and b) encourages the old problems to reappear – leaving the middle class once again holding the bag for the losses! Where is our collective memory?

Talk about holding the bag for losses, consider that through four huge bankruptcies, Trump has become an expert in leaving his investors and creditors holding the bag. And he has even expressed the view that threatening our nation's creditors with default on our national debt may be appropriate, electing to “overlook” the fact that such action at the national level would result in the average Joe having to finance the nation's debt at a much higher rate – costing the country billions every year! We cannot escape the “costs” of a default on the national debt because it is the country that is left holding the bag! How can the average American put any faith in Trump's declaration that he, and he alone, can “Make America Great Again,” when he does not appear to know the difference between the economics of the commercial domain and the economics of the public domain at the national level?

7) Force Corporations to Remain in America and Keep High Paying Jobs Here, if Corporations Want to Do Business Here

This proposal may sound good to the middle class which has suffered from the loss of high paying production as well as service jobs. But it is totally unrealistic in a world economy where corporations can locate their headquarters and their production/service facilities virtually anywhere and do business anywhere. How do we distinguish between internal and external corporations when most corporations are international to some extent and the largest are truly multinational? Corporations that are forced to remain in America will simply move elsewhere under a different corporate name or merge with a corporation that is located elsewhere. And if we exclude “foreign” corporations from doing business in the U.S., all we will accomplish is starting a tariff war among nations, which only serves to reduce trade and the access for American products and services in the world marketplace.

In order to create a condition of greater economic competitive fairness at the international level and benefit the average American worker, the answer to this corporate departure and outsourcing problem is to redefine the WTO and its subset of regional trade pacts to include social and ecological variables as significant in relating monetarily the economies of different countries, and not allow economic variables alone to determine the situation! This is the kind of solution that gets at one of the most important causes of the economically stagnant American middle class. The WTO is ignoring the facts that many developing countries are environmentally irresponsible and socially repressive with large populations of relatively poor citizens willing to work at very low wages. And when corporations

are enticed to move to these countries for the benefits of lower economic costs, the higher paid and more ecologically responsible American middle class takes the hit. Making appropriate adjustments within the WTO can actually address the unfair position of the “average American Joe” in the world economy. And these WTO changes can create a more level and stable playing field for businesses to compete without their having to chase after the next lowest wage country with the fewest environmental restrictions.

Conclusion

I do not doubt that Trump and many Conservative Republicans honestly believe themselves to be empathetic when it comes to the stagnant American middle class and poverty and inequality in America. It is just that their individualistic, top-down, pro-business based solutions do not in fact address these challenges. Deregulation, Tax Reduction, and “Thousand Points of Light” are proposals that have proven themselves to be of little consequence. But Conservatives continue to present themselves as empathetic with the “average” American and to serve up in different guises the promise of their anti-tax, deregulated business solution as the answer to revive Americans' participation in the American Dream. And as frustrated as many middle class Americans are presently, Conservatives, like Trump, continue to get away with the fundamental inconsistency between their claimed empathy for the “little guy” and their actual policies. These policies make a demon out of government and keep the “average Joe” consumed by fear of some “other” [terrorist, immigrant, refugee, Muslim, communist, Russian, Chinese, etc.], while the supposedly economically “liberating” programs that Conservatives enact support the interests of corporations, the financial industry, the military industrial complex, and the wealthy and have the ultimate effect of advancing inequality in America.

Some Conservatives, and especially the sophisticated political PACs of the billionaires that fund conservative political candidates and causes, are well aware that their ideology and subsequent economic and political proposals constitute a smoke screen to hide their real self-centered objectives. Other Conservatives just have not thought it through in terms of the facts, in terms of what history reveals, and in terms of the internal inconsistencies between what is claimed, what is proposed, and what are the consequences. And the average “frustrated” Joe, who is vulnerable to Conservative fear tactics and who is attracted to conservative individualistic values, to their empathetic claims, and to their promises of an improved economic condition, time after time fails to see that “The emperor [‘Blue Collar’ Trump] wears no clothes.”