The political vision that conservatism at its best can offer

**Conservatism in an Age of Alienation**

Yuval Levin

In the wake of the 2016 election, some conservatives have been unsure about whether we have won or lost. And strange as it might seem, conservatives in general might be wise to sustain and cultivate such uncertainty as a way of understanding ourselves and our role in the Trump era.

The election results tend to support an unusually ambiguous mood. On the one hand, the vote certainly went very well for the right. The Republican Party, which has been in large part an instrument of conservative ideas since the 1970s, is as strong now as it has been in a century. The Democrats, long the political scourge of conservatives, appear weaker than they have been at any point since the birth of American Progressivism.

The GOP holds not only the presidency but also both houses of Congress (although Republicans lost a few seats in each house), thirty-three governorships, and control of sixty-seven of the nation’s ninety-eight state legislative chambers—the most it has controlled since the party was founded. Republicans hold majorities in both state legislative chambers in thirty-three states. In twenty-four states, they control both chambers of the legislature and the governorship. The new president may not be a conservative, but the vast majority of these many other elected officials are, as are most of Trump’s appointees. This could well leave conservatives empowered to pursue our policy objectives.

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to a degree unmatched since the birth of the modern conservative movement.

On the other hand, 2016 was not on the whole a time of triumph for American conservatism. The Republican Party’s almost unprecedented hold on power comes in a year, and has come at least in part through the very process, that has left the conservative movement with a weaker hold on the party than it has had since the early 1970s. Donald Trump, whose victory in November was of course the most momentous of the election’s results, not only did not run as a conservative but actually ran in a way that highlighted the limits of conservatism’s power within the party and in national politics beyond. He ignored or derided countless conservative shibboleths at various times during the campaign, offered instead a vigorous populist appeal, and soundly defeated no fewer than fifteen plainly conservative opponents in the primaries. When he clinched the nomination in May, Trump made this implication of his win explicit: “This is called the Republican Party,” he told an interviewer, “it’s not called the Conservative Party.”

This election, and indeed the past several elections, should therefore leave conservatives concerned about the appeal of the case we have tended to make to the country, and about the pertinence of our views and arguments to contemporary American problems. In this sense, the challenge that 2016 presents to conservatives in particular is not a function of questions about Donald Trump’s character or personal fitness for the presidency, though those questions should certainly concern all Americans. The distinct additional challenge for conservatives is, rather, a function of the way in which Trump’s victory highlighted the weakness of the self-understanding of conservatives as masters and possessors of the Republican Party and the inadequacies of the arguments, policies, and ideals that conservatives have sought to champion. The election has thus left conservatives in a position to pursue the policy agenda we have trumpeted for years and yet should leave us unsure about whether it is the right agenda for this time in America, or the one that voters desire. This year should leave us asking hard questions, which is not what winning usually feels like.

The reasons for this peculiar ambiguity cut to the heart of the lessons that 2016 should help America learn and force us to confront some challenging implications of this election—challenging for both Trump’s backers and his critics on the right. Confronting those implications should also mean confronting an always challenging and fundamental set of questions: What are conservatives for now? And how can we best be of service to the country?

Failing to ask these questions has contributed much to the troubles facing conservatives. And asking them now might be the way to use the exceptional opportunity conservatives suddenly face and to mitigate the grave dangers that have come along with it.

**Alien nation**

Near the core of the challenge for conservatives in the era of Trump is the fact that the election that brought Trump and Republicans to power was a protest election. This was true for vast swaths of Americans on both the left and the right. A great many of Hillary Clinton’s voters were motivated above all by opposition to Donald Trump. A great many of Trump’s voters were moved by opposition both to Clinton and to what she represented: the elite governing class that has come to treat American life as its rightful possession and to approach Americans with other ideas as a “basket of deplorables”—to borrow Clinton’s repulsive phrase.

These two protesting factions fought to a near draw on Election Day, with Clinton
winning a small popular majority and Trump edging her out in the Electoral College. But these two kinds of protests are not the same: the left protested what it deemed an obnoxious obstacle to its vision of the future, while the right protested the status quo despite not coalescing around any particular vision of the future. In an interview with the American Conservative’s Rod Dreher not long after the election, the Polish intellectual Ryszard Legutko, a brilliant observer of modern democracy, noted that the American election revealed two subnations within our political culture:

On the one side there is the Obama-Clinton America claiming to represent what is best in the modern politics, more or less united by a clear left-wing agenda whose aim is to continue the restructuring of the American society, family, schools, communities, morals. This America is in tune with what is considered to be a general tendency of the modern world, including Europe and non-European Western countries. But there seems to exist another America, deeply dissatisfied with the first one, angry and determined, but at the same time confused and chaotic, longing for action and energy, but unsure of itself, proud of their country’s lost greatness, but having no great leaders, a strange mixture of groups and ideologies, with no clear identity or political agenda. This other America, if personified, would resemble somebody not very different from Donald Trump.

This perceptive description helps clarify some of the challenge today’s right confronts. But perhaps it is not quite correct to say that the Americans who coalesced around Trump (especially before he was the Republican nominee, when they had other right-leaning options) cannot be named or identified. They are, in many respects, a coalition of the alienated. Trump’s appeal, and his victory, had a great deal to do with his ability to give voice to a growing (and in key respects surely justified) alienation from the dominant streams of the culture, economy, and politics in America.

“Alienated” need not be a putrid, Marxist designation. The great twentieth-century sociologist Robert Nisbet defined alienation...
as “the state of mind that can find a social order remote, incomprehensible, or fraudulent; beyond real hope or desire; inviting apathy, boredom, or even hostility.” This is precisely how Trump and many of his most vocal supporters frequently spoke about America over the past year.

The vague feeling that what had become of our society was somehow remote and incomprehensible—that it was insane, or at the very least not America as we knew it—was a prominent feature of the kind of frustration that many early Trump supporters articulated. The idea that there was something fraudulent about our social order and its institutions was everywhere in Trump’s rhetoric—directed at various points to the electoral process, the media, the political parties, the legal system, the judiciary, the IRS, the FBI, and on and on among our institutions. The sense that this incomprehensible fraud perpetrated on the public by its own elites had robbed America of hope was key to the willingness of many on the right to overlook Trump’s own shortcomings and welcome the potential for disruption that he introduced.

That things had gone so badly wrong meant that the status quo, America as they found it, often seemed to draw not protectiveness or concern from some of those who made the case for Trump but apathy, if not despair, and with it outright hostility and contempt—and at times even sheer boredom with our tedious, elitist politics. For some in the conservative media, in particular, Trump offered relief from the prospect of yet another election fought over marginal tax rates and vague slogans about the role of government. Politics had grown dangerously dull and disconnected, and Trump sounded to some opinion shapers on the right less like the politicians they had grown tired of defending and more like their audience: frustrated, at times bewildered, and frequently bored and angry at the failures of the people in charge.

All this was mixed for some with a powerful sense of loss, which is not the same as alienation, of course, and which has long been an element of the conservative disposition in America. Trump’s appeal to American greatness struck a patriotic nerve among some of his supporters and was certainly received in some quarters as a much-needed call to restore the nation’s dignity and strength. In this respect, it appealed to some sentiments, and to some voters, frequently drawn to conservative politics. But what was new about Trump’s appeal, and what ultimately seemed most powerful about it, had more to do with a kind of partial reaction against the character of liberalism (indeed liberal democracy) in our time. It was, to be sure, a reaction in the name of the honor of the citizens today’s elites treat with contempt, the workers today’s economy treats as dispensable, the traditions today’s culture treats as primitive. It was a partial reaction, however, because Trump generally channeled the frustrations of these Americans but not their aspirations. He shared their resentments far more than their commitments, let alone their piety or their devotions, and so he tended to translate their yearnings into alienation of the sort that drew many other Americans to him.

Alienation can sometimes make for a powerful organizing principle for an electoral coalition, especially when hostility overpowers apathy among the sentiments it breeds. But it does not make for a natural organizing principle for a governing coalition. The sense of lacking a stake in the nation’s governing institutions—the feeling that those institutions are remote and unresponsive—makes it difficult to know what to do when they fall into your possession.

And the upsurge of this alienation on the right is even more of a challenge for conservatism in particular, because alienation cannot help but make the right less conservative. However we might define it, conservatism is surely at the simplest level an expression of a
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desire to conserve the good more than it is an expression of a passion to destroy the bad. Conservatism is protective. It is so because in some cases it is moved by a love of home and hearth, a sense of ownership, rootedness, and belonging that invites a warm defensiveness. But it is so also because it is rooted in low expectations of the human creature, and so tends to be more impressed with flourishing than it is shocked by failure. It is shielded, to some degree, from disillusionment by not being overly illusioned to begin with.

The assumption of human fallenness—of the permanently crooked and contradictory character of the flawed being somehow created in a divine image, possessed of fundamental dignity and inalienable rights yet prone to excess and to sin and ever in need of self-restraint and moral formation—is the root and premise of the conservative disposition. And it is the source of the conservative’s peculiar pessimistic hopefulness.

Conservatives tend to be pessimistic because we believe that the most profound and basic human problems recur in every generation since they are intrinsic to the human person—a function of our permanent incongruities and limitations. These must be acknowledged, counterbalanced, mitigated, or accommodated, but they can never really go away. No social organization or arrangement of policies and institutions can permanently overcome them, because the human being can be understood only as an individual and personal creature, albeit a fundamentally social one.

But the permanence of these human limitations makes conservatives hopeful because it means that we can learn from the human experience—from the accomplishments of our species, our civilization, our society, our community—how better to enable imperfect men and women to thrive and improve themselves. This is one reason why conservatives are traditionalists, and why we value long-standing institutions and practices. They have stood the test of time, which is a trial-and-error process carried out across generations confronted with essentially the same kinds of problems rooted in the nature of the human person. Change and adaptation in response to new circumstances is best carried out through the institutions and traditions formed by that process rather than around them so as to give us a chance to build incrementally on what works in order to address what does not.

Low expectations are built into this way of thinking about how society does and does not change, as is a view of moral progress that is fundamentally recursive. Moral progress, as conservatives tend to see it, is something that happens within the lives of individual persons more than across the lives of societies, and therefore must more or less begin again in every generation. Every new human person is born imbued with the same potential, inclined to the same vices, and subject to the same yearnings as human beings have always been, and therefore is in need of and able to benefit from the sorts of moral formation that have helped men and women make moral progress in the past. High among what conservatives work to conserve are the means of making the preconditions for this kind of moral formation available to those in the next generation who pursue it, and the institutions that might drive them to pursue it.

This is why alienation tends to distort conservatism and to threaten what conservatives value. It is a problem to be addressed by a conservative politics but not a viable or sustainable source of energy for a conservative politics. Conservatives incline to be heavily invested in society and its institutions, even when deeply concerned about their condition and their fate. When these institutions are threatened from the left, conservatives tend to be defensive of them. Even when they are dominated by the left, as so many of our institutions are, conservatives by instinct
and reflection tend to argue for reclamation and recovery—for building spaces within these institutions more than for rejection and contempt of them. If our traditional ways of doing things speak to yearnings that arise anew in every generation, then there is always reason to hope for a resurgence of orthodoxy and to work for it.

Alienation denies or rejects the possibility of such resurgence and therefore the importance of working to keep that possibility open. The work of keeping it open is the work that conservatives can often be found doing, particularly outside politics, as in the service of religious missions or of liberal education, among other causes.

The prevalence of a certain kind of alienation, indeed a certain kind of despair, among some in both those realms—religious leaders and purveyors of liberal education—was therefore among the most distressing of all the signs of trouble on the right in 2016. Considering the place and purpose of conservatives in the wake of the election means taking those signs seriously.

### Charging the cockpit

Some degree of panic and despair has long been an element of presidential electioneering in America. The stakes are high, and the drama of a presidential race makes them feel even higher. But it has tended to be more common on the left, where progress has long been held to hinge on every election outcome. Conservatives have been no strangers to melancholy and pessimism, of course, but despondency has prevailed less frequently as an electoral vocabulary. The language of despair, of last chances and cliffs and abysses and crashes, has come to dominate our political talk more recently. And it was particularly prevalent this past year.

“America lives or dies in thirty-nine days,” Fox News and radio host Sean Hannity announced on his radio program on September 30. And this was only a slightly more blunt formulation of a message widely heard among Trump’s backers on the right. In fact, some of his most religiously and most intellectually inclined supporters, perhaps partly in an effort to fortify an otherwise uneasy endorsement, tended to argue the case for Trump as a Hail Mary pass that might well be the American republic’s last chance.

Christian conservative leader Gary Bauer spoke for many in September when he told an interviewer, “I can make a case that this may be the last election chance we have to actually win with somebody that is relatively close to our views on a variety of issues.” The country, Bauer said, was “careening out of control. We’re on our way to crashing into something.” In fact, in a postelection poll conducted by PRRI and The Atlantic in November, 53 percent of evangelical voters said they believed the 2016 election was “the last chance to stop America’s decline.”

And it was not only Christian conservatives who saw it this way. A fair number of Trump’s supporters among the right’s intellectuals and writers made the same case. As one learned Trump backer, writing for the website of the prestigious Claremont Review of Books under the pseudonym Publius Decius Mus, memorably put it in September:

2016 is the Flight 93 election: charge the cockpit or you die. You may die anyway. You—or the leader of your party—may make it into the cockpit and not know how to fly or land the plane. There are no guarantees. Except one: if you don’t try, death is certain. To compound the metaphor: a Hillary Clinton presidency is Russian Roulette with a semi-auto. With Trump, at least you can spin the cylinder and take your chances.

What had brought America so close to the edge of death at this particular time, in the
eyes of these analysts, was the triumph of Progressivism. If conservatives have been serious in their criticisms and worries about the left—regarding the decline of our culture, the abandonment of constitutional principles and practices, the collapse of the family, the corrosive effects of the welfare state and the administrative state—then surely the cumulative effects of all these must have brought our society to near suffocation by now. To think otherwise is to suggest that the conservative critiques have been unfounded; to accept those critiques is to acknowledge that America is nearly out of time.

Most of these thoughtful observers (unlike Sean Hannity) were hardly confident that Donald Trump could somehow orchestrate a rescue or reversal. Angelo Codevilla, the renowned scholar of international relations, argued in September that, regardless of who won the election, “the republic established by America’s Founders is probably gone.” This is a function of the path the country had long traveled. “ELECTING either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump cannot change that trajectory. Because each candidate represents constituencies hostile to republicanism, each in its own way, these individuals are not what this election is about.” Rather, the election was about somehow breaking out of that path and at least creating the minimal possibility of a reversal—a risk worth taking given that the only alternative was the conclusion of a terminal decline.

Behind this framing of the options was a profound despair about America’s prospects and a sense that any concern short of such despair was unserious. It is an attitude that leaves no room for believing that things could be better except by believing that things almost could not be worse. And in this respect it closes off the usual conservative response to times of challenge and opens instead a path much more amenable to radical disjunction and a thorough tearing down.

For conservatives, such a despairing approach to politics threatens both a failure of perspective and a failure of responsibility. It raises the prospect of a failure of perspective because the argument that things could hardly get much worse is almost certainly wrong. Things could surely get far worse—because the present, for all our troubles, is far from dystopic, and because poor choices, misjudgments, recklessness, and plain old bad luck could badly undermine our future.

The idea that ours is the decisive time of history’s reckoning is always attractive, but conservatives in particular should see that it is almost certainly wrong. We are called to enable a revival, not to mount a total revolution, and therefore to hold up the good before the rising generation rather than to tear down all we have inherited and treat it as unsalvageable. At the end of his final book, American Babylon, in which he articulated many of the deepest concerns about our culture and society that animate many on the right, the late Richard John Neuhaus acknowledged the permanent temptation to see our own time as the exception to this rule, and noted the importance of resisting it. He wrote:

We seek to be faithful in a time not of our choosing but of our testing. We resist the hubris of presuming that it is the definitive time and place of historical promise or tragedy, but it is our time and place. It is a time of many times: a time for dancing, even if to the songs of Zion in a foreign land; a time for walking together, unintimidated when we seem to be a small and beleaguered band; a time for rejoicing in momentary triumphs, and for defiance in momentary defeats; a time for persistence in reasoned argument, never tiring in proposing to the world a more excellent way.

This is never easy to do. But it is essential if we are to resist overreading both defeats and triumphs, and if we are to see clearly both the
strengths and the weaknesses we possess in confronting our country’s problems. Things could be much better, and we must work to make them so, even though they could also be much worse.

But the greater danger of despair runs even deeper, to the essence of that peculiar pessimistic hopefulness of the conservative. The hope that conservatives harbor is generational. This is so because neither our social progress nor our social regress is transmitted biologically; thus human nature remains unchanged, and we should expect to find in every generation human beings with the same capacities and needs and longings for meaning and truth, and this makes both continuity and renewal possible. But to make continuity and renewal actual requires that those searching for meaning and truth—which in every generation likely means people who are searching for alternatives to what the mass culture offers them—be able to find them.

It is imperative, in other words, that those (generally young) men and women who seek after edifying alternatives find not despairing Cassandras in hysterical panic but rather winsome, welcoming teachers and guides—pastors, mentors, and instructors who hold out as alluring not a sharp break from all that came before but a pass to a rich heritage in religious wisdom, liberal learning, and philosophical truth. Today’s conservative intellectuals found such guides, in many cases at a time when despair would have been even more understandable than it is now. The next generation should too. Giving in to despair would deny those in search of such guidance what they require.

**Mistaking disruption for transformation**

Of course, Cassandra was right. Her prophecy of doom was borne out. It would be a mistake to treat despair as just wrong in principle. Even for Christians, only despair of the Lord is a sin. Despair of some people, institutions, communities, or even nations is sometimes simply justified.

But despair of America is not justified, and the case for why this moment in particular should be the moment to despair does not add up to much. It assigns to Progressives much more malice (and competence) than is warranted and credits them with far more than they have actually achieved, and it sells our society short. While we confront immense problems, America also has extraordinary strengths at its disposal and a deep reserve of moderation that has always served it well.

To look upon our country in our time as a society so degraded and depraved that almost nothing could be worse than its present condition is to allow despondency or partisanship to cloud our judgment. And to think that a presidential election victory—indeed that a loss for the left, almost regardless of the person who would win—could by itself set us back on the right course is vastly to overvalue electoral politics as a means of renewal and strength.

And yet we cannot dismiss the widespread alienation and despair laid bare by this election as simply an error. One of the virtues of democracy is that it forces us to take the worries of our fellow citizens seriously and therefore compels us to confront real problems we might otherwise ignore. The alienation that prevails among so many fellow citizens is a warning that our economic arrangements, cultural norms, and political system—and indeed our elite institutions in general—have grown distant and unresponsive, and are leaving far too many Americans feeling despised and disrespected, and lacking a stake in their own society. Simply embodying that alienation is not a solution, but ignoring it and just complacently repeating the stale policies, arguments, and slogans that have dominated our politics for decades would exacerbate the problem.
The trouble is that Donald Trump’s circle on the right tends to consist largely (albeit not exclusively of course) of a peculiar combination of the alienated and the complacent—outsiders with a keen sense that the system has failed them and doesn’t belong to them but no clear vision of how to transform it, and insiders who believe a clean rerun of Reaganism is all that America lacks. Alienation and complacency are in tension, but they can cooperate, each for its own reason, in treating disruption as a sufficient substitute for transformation and contempt as a stand-in for reform.

The space between alienation and complacency is where solutions must come from. But filling that gap requires a political vision that takes the roots of today’s alienation seriously as problems to be addressed. Such a vision would seek to help more Americans respect our institutions by making those institutions more respectable, more functional, and more responsive and adaptive. It would seek to take Americans seriously and to honor them as human persons—not helpless recipients of benefits, not interchangeable units of labor, not radically isolated pursuers of pleasure, and not bundles of abstract identities, but as men and women who desire to flourish and to thrive and to be needed and responsible and to belong.

A political vision attentive to the relational truths about human beings is just what conservatism at its best can offer. And the problems exposed by this election year call out for a modernized, self-critical, twenty-first-century conservatism—a conservatism that is uncertain if this election has marked a victory or a defeat, and is therefore both aggressive in pursuit of opportunities and alert to dangers. It would take such a circumspect conservatism to avoid overreading this election, and so to grasp that the problems we face run much deeper than electoral politics and were neither caused by the wrong party holding office nor can be resolved by a transfer of power alone.

At the root of the most significant problems America faces at home is the weakening of our core institutions—family and community, church and school, business and labor associations, civic and fraternal and political groups. Political progressivism and its cultural offshoots have certainly played their part in this weakening, elevating the individual and the national state at the expense of all that stands in between while corroding our constitutional system of government. But a political victory over the party of Progressivism is not by itself a meaningful advance against these problems, especially if it empowers first and foremost a political leader who is implicitly friendly to large swaths of the Progressive worldview.

If the left was winning the culture war before the election, surely it is still winning it now. If the administrative state was strangling our liberty, it would take more than putting the government in new hands to change that. If identity politics was undermining American citizenship, some meaningful countereffort would seem to be called for. An election that put the left back on its heels might well create opportunities to do something about some of this, but by itself it would not affirmatively change things or seize those opportunities. It would take more than winning that election to take on the sources of alienation and despair. It would take a mode of governance suited to the problem.

As conservatives consider what we should be doing in the Trump years, we should be guided by a sense of what that badly needed mode of governance would involve. The right has been much more certain this past year of what it opposes than of what it seeks to advance, and that too poses dangers to which conservatives should be especially alert.
Relearning how to govern ourselves

That we on the right know what we oppose better than what we propose suggests that the left is more coherent than we are. But the left is now bewildered and exhausted too. This election has left liberals with the terrifying sense that their cherished aspirations, which have long since curdled into lazy expectations, may not actually describe America’s future. They too are coming face to face with the inadequacy of what they have been offering the country.

Indeed, the past year should leave us all with the distinct impression that we have reached the end of an era in American politics, even if it remains far from clear what the next era will look like. The electorate is clearly dissatisfied with the options the two parties have long offered it. That is what made this a protest election above all. No one can yet quite say exactly where this dissatisfaction points, though of course we must try to learn what we can on that front from Trump’s success. But the pattern of dissatisfaction—and particularly of the dissatisfaction of each party’s base with its own party’s offerings—is surely suggestive.

On the left, voters were dissatisfied with the Democratic Party’s inclination to abstract away from their needs, interests, and identities. They nearly chose an angry, elderly socialist rather than opt for the bland technocracy of today’s Progressivism. On the right, voters were dissatisfied with the rote, slogans conservative of much of the GOP, which repeats the ends of Ronald Reagan’s sentences but has long ago forgotten how they started. In both cases, abstractions about freedom seem less satisfying than they used to be, while gestures in the direction of solidarity are deeply compelling even when they are not fully worked out.

Because they are not fully worked out, these gestures can take dark and brutish forms. On the left, where freedom has lately been understood as liberation from responsibility through a combination of economic collectivism and moral individualism, the desire for solidarity has tended to come down to demanding comprehensive fealty to that vision. This means calling for yet more material entitlements and for an ethic of economic responsibility (enforced, for instance, against the very wealthy) without corresponding moral and civic responsibility beyond the commitment to expressive individualism. This combination, especially in its economic facets, was evident in the appeal of Bernie Sanders. It is not devoid of moral force. Conservatives should not mistake it for relativism. But its deficient vision of the human person renders it more a threat than a spur to genuine cohesion in the end, particularly when it sets out to enforce against recalcitrant traditionalists the paradoxical notion that the ideal of individual liberation must be universally applauded.

On the right, where freedom has come frequently to be understood in libertarian terms as the mere absence of restraint, the yearning for solidarity is sometimes expressed as a yearning for purity—or rather for unity achieved by the exclusion of hostile, foreign, differing visions of the good. Ignoring the fact that such differences are inherent in any free society, this view relies in part on a particularly blinding selective nostalgia and in part on legitimate grievances against an overly self-satisfied progressive elite to argue that overthrowing that elite would free us to be unified again. It thus seriously underestimates the challenges of cohesion in a fragmented nation.

The left’s lurch toward solidarity therefore often sounds like demands for conformity—even at the expense of the freedoms of speech and religion. The right’s grasps at solidarity easily come to seem exclusionary or intolerant. And both incline to seek solidarity through unitary dominance at the national level. It is more likely that a viable path to
solidarity, especially in a vast and fractured country, would need to call upon subsidiarity and a revival of the intermediary institutions of society, in and through which the bubbles we all now inhabit might be forced to meet and to combine. And the need for such subsidiarity could also help us understand what it is we are seeking in our quest for greater solidarity in twenty-first-century America: a unifying civic culture, rooted in a shared national experience and in truths held in common, which could sustain a variety of moral subcultures suited to enabling human beings and citizens to flourish together.

There is reason to expect that political friction, and that our incorrigible American niceness, will smooth the hard edges of our quest for solidarity over time. But however that quest goes, it is worth seeing that these shifting emphases of our two broad political coalitions suggest an underlying shift in our common life from an American politics that expresses above all a yearning for freedom to one that at least alongside that expresses a powerful yearning for solidarity.

That may prove to be one of the more enduring and consequential lessons we Americans have learned about ourselves lately. And together with what we might learn from the past year about the frustration, alienation, dissatisfaction, and even despair that prevail in parts of the American electorate, this lesson might help us begin to chart the outlines of what an agenda of restoration and recovery could look like.

Trump did put his finger on some elements of such an agenda, to be sure. He seemed to grasp that a politics of abstraction was part of our problem—that we need instead to put greater emphasis on the concrete in our country. America is not an idea; it is a nation that can be its best when devoted to certain ideas. But it is a particular nation filled with particular people who deserve leaders who put their needs and interests first. Some implications of that for immigration policy, and in some respects for economic and social policy, should be clearer in light of Trump’s electoral successes.

But in a number of other respects, Trump has embodied our problems rather than articulating solutions to them. His appeal has been a function of the failures of key institutions in American life, and he has tended to exacerbate and aggravate those failures. While he gave voice at times to the alienation, isolation, frustration, and despair that many voters feel, he has not generally pointed toward ways of addressing them.

What we require, then, is a political vision and a governing agenda geared to filling the vacuums that Trump’s success has made apparent. We need means of addressing problems that combine material want and moral emptiness and recognize the human person in his fullness. We need to help people both meet their needs and be more needed. We need to combat despair and disillusionment by reviving some genuine voices of moral authority and reaffirming the case for both personal and mutual responsibility. We need to fight alienation by putting power a little closer to the interpersonal level and making the social order seem a little less distant. What we need, in other words, is precisely what conservatism at its best might stand to offer.

A conservatism that sets out to meet these needs should recognize, to begin with, what the left in the Obama years clearly failed to see: that its own political victories can never be permanent. This means that conservatives should first and foremost pursue not programmatic policy objectives but rather the preconditions for a healthier politics. Constitutional guardrails matter more than any specific policy preferences—because they will last longer, and because they will give shape and form to our political habits and our civic life and help us take the principles and self-evident truths underlying our politics seriously. A constructive conservative
politics in the Trump years must therefore first and foremost be a politics of constitutional restoration.

Where it does take on specific policy goals, its aim should be not to impose a smarter technocracy but to better enable Americans to help one another. One cause of today’s widespread alienation from politics is a failure of public policy to respond to changing realities in American life. A more conservative approach to public policy would not seek its own version of the Great Society but rather ways to help government be responsive to society instead of displacing it—by decentralizing power and allowing solutions to rise from the bottom up. It would seek answers that look like twenty-first-century life and so would leave behind the tired dogmas of social democracy and take our policy debates at last beyond the welfare state.

Such an approach—by reaching to the core of how we govern ourselves, how we understand progress, and what our public institutions do—would be more transformative, not milder, than a surge of pure disruption. It would be better suited to taking on the challenging practical problems of the twenty-first century economy because it would be better able to take human beings seriously.

Over the past decade and more, ideas rooted in this kind of vision have been developed and refined by a cadre of generally younger, policy-minded conservatives. From health care and education to welfare, regulation, public administration, and across the full spectrum of domestic affairs, they have worked to turn this vision into substantive policy proposals. And in the Trump years, there may well be opportunities for some of those ideas to be attempted.

Sometimes these attempts will be consonant with Donald Trump’s political vision and agenda, putting meat on the bones of his often vague appeals. Sometimes they will be in serious tension with him, engaging in constitutional restoration that does not seem to be a priority for Trump, decentralizing where he seeks to consolidate power, or restraining his inclinations to exacerbate alienation or to sow division and havoc by sheer recklessness.

Conservatives will often need to approach Trump skeptically and transactionally, knowing what we are after and willing to bargain for it, but also to set clear boundaries on what we will abide. The work we pursue should not be defined by Trump so much as by the needs that his rise to power has clarified. It is a project for conservatives as we come to terms with what the past year should have taught us about our strengths and weaknesses and our place in the broader coalition of the American right.

And as a project for conservatives, it must ultimately be understood as a civic labor of love, not a political fight to the death. It should aim, as far as possible, to uproot the disposition toward alienation and despair in American life and to plant in its place the essential conservative tendency: to love the good more than we hate the bad. That means looking to improve more than to scorn, to build on what works more than to tear down, and to understand our inadequacies by looking at them in light of what they keep us from being more than what they make us into.

This is the kind of social and political vision that conservatives have long sought to offer our country. And the experience of this election year, by simultaneously rebuking and empowering conservatives, should compel us to see just how much we might have to offer now—and how much good we might do if we are up to it.