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Republican Insurgency? Trump as a Modern Day Frankenstein's Monster

By Anthony DiMaggio
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Donald Trump's rise to national prominence is described in many ways. Perhaps most commonly, it is described as fueling a war between the Republican rank-and-file and the "Republican establishment." Such language is common in the primary election season. In the *New York Times*, for example, the words "Trump" and "Republican establishment" appeared in 75 stories from January through March 2016, or an average of nearly once per day. I won't deny that there is much hand wringing against Trump by prominent Republican officials and their financial supporters. I will, however, argue the following two points: 1. The divide between the "GOP establishment" and Trump is largely a fiction. It is the product more of rhetoric than reality, but is being stoked by eccentric, egotistical party elites and their sycophants in the mass media; 2. Trump's supporters are not nearly as radicalized against the neoliberal political-

economic status quo as they are made out to be in popular commentary. In other words, the Trump insurgency has been largely over-sold in the news.

We should be honest about what accounts for a significant part of Trump's rise: the very real, and growing economic insecurity of the white working and middle classes. One can see this anxiety, for example, in exit polling from Michigan, which suggested that both Trump and Bernie Sanders polled best among primary voters who felt they have been greatly hurt by "free trade" agreements. Furthermore, Trump gathers much of his support from working class Americans. *Washington Post-ABC News* polling from December 2015 finds that Trump's support is greater among those earning less than \$50,000 a year, compared to those earning more than \$50,000, and among Americans with no college degree, compared to those with a college education. Trump builds consistent support from working Americans by stressing his opposition to the outsourcing of jobs to China, Mexico, and elsewhere, and promises to "make America great again" by returning manufacturing jobs to the U.S.

Having acknowledged that there are populist tendencies to Trump's campaign, it seems that many Americans are eager to over-sell his anti-establishment bona fides. In one recent example, a friend of mine from graduate school recently spoke to me about the instability within the Republican Party: "It's clash between the Republican establishment and their voting base. The latter now thinks (and rightfully so) that the establishment used them. What has the establishment done for the white working class? Make it almost impossible for their children to go to college. Outsource their jobs, and then claim they [Republican voters] are part of Romney's "47 percent" [of mooching, lazy Americans]. Then say that they have to cut Medicare and Social Security?"

My friend's comments overlap quite a bit with those expressed in a number of mass media venues. For example, in late-March, the *New York Times* ran a feature story titled "How the GOP Elite Lost its Voters to Donald Trump." The article warned of "some conservative concerns that 'Republicans had become too identified with big business and the wealthy'," and worried that this image among Republican Americans was weighing down the party. "While wages declined [in recent decades] and workers grew anxious about retirement, Republicans offered an economic program still centered on tax cuts for the affluent and the curtailing of popular entitlements like Medicare and Social Security." The *Times* piece cited conservative *American Enterprise Institute* fellow James Pethokoukis, who claimed that Republican officials' approach to the marketing the party in 2016 was doomed to failure: "They figured, 'these are conservative voters, anti-Obama voters [across the country]. We'll give them the same policies we've always given them. High-earner tax cuts, which people are skeptical of; business tax cuts, even though these businesses seem to be doing great. It didn't resonate with the problems in their lives."

The editors of the *Washington Post* recently warned that a vote for Trump would be a vote for a radical deviation from the Republican norm. In an editorial titled "GOP Leaders, You Must Do Everything in Your Power to Stop Trump," they wrote that Republican elites are increasingly recognizing how much Trump's candidacy threatens traditional Republican values. More specifically, they spoke of Trump's support for war crimes (he supports targeting the relatives of alleged terrorists), his reactionary stance on immigration and deportation of undocumented immigrants, in addition to his sexism, racism, and systematic lying. Rational observers could be

forgiven for noting the absurdity of the *Post*'s claims, as if these problems suddenly began with Donald Trump, and aren't longstanding features of the "mainstream" of the Republican Party.

Consider many of the claims Trump has made in recent months, and how little they differ from traditional Republican rhetoric. He is against amnesty for illegal immigrants, and wants to focus on deporting those not in the U.S. legally. This is no different, substantively, from former Presidential frontrunner Mitt Romney's claims that illegal immigrants needed to voluntarily identify and deport themselves. His strong focus on anti-Mexican stereotypes and on building a wall between the U.S. and Mexico, however, has been an embarrassment for the Republican Party during an election year. Or what about Trump's position that global warming is a fiction, made up by whiny and deceptive scientists and liberals? This position is standard fare with Republican officials. As is Trump's support for militaristic policies designed to intensify the U.S. engagement in countries like Iraq and Syria, which has long been called for by Republican officials across the board. What about tax policies? Trump calls for tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations, similar to those implemented under Reagan and George W. Bush, although even more extreme in terms of their imminent effects on the deficit and debt. What of Trump's hatemongering against women, minorities, and Muslims? The Republican Party's fixation on Trump's bigotry is laughable considering that Republican operatives at *Fox News* and on rightwing talk radio, and other Republican establishment figures consistently traffic in vicious attacks on minorities and disadvantaged demographic groups.

Trump's supposed deviation from the Republican establishment is largely one of style over substance. "Respectable" Republicans avoid the crassness associated with Trump's rhetorical flourishes and shameless stereotyping in front of cameras during an election year. But it's seen as perfectly acceptable for Republican Party elites – a la right wing media – to traffic in the most horrific stereotypes against women, minorities, and Muslims, so long as Republican political candidates don't flaunt their hatred in the months prior to election day.

Equally disturbing is the increasingly popular narrative that Trump supporters are wise populists who have figured out that the Republican Party is screwing them – hence they've turned away from party elites in favor of Trump. This sort of framing of the 2016 election displays a remarkable naïveté regarding the intelligence of the average Republican voter. Consider, for example, the claim reported in the *New York Times* that Republican voters are tired of tax cuts for the rich, and that this serves as a motive for rebelling against the establishment. There is little truth to this claim. Trump and Cruz are the largest supporters of supply side economic theory and tax cuts for the rich. Trump himself has embraced the brain-dead theory of voodoo economics – which absurdly claims that massive cuts in government tax revenues will magically produce growing revenues, since U.S. economic growth will be so profound that tax collections will grow via a massively growing economy. Voodoo economics was soundly disproven during the 1980s and the 2000s, following the Reagan and Bush tax cuts which exploded the national deficit and debt, yet Trump shamelessly employs the theory to argue that the country can simultaneously afford both massive tax cuts for the rich and continued spending on welfare programs like Social Security and Medicare. His promises amount to nothing more than selling snake oil, as anyone with a minimal understanding of public policy and taxation should understand. Trump's rise to prominence raises a crucial question about the American public: how many times do voters need to get screwed by Republican Party leaders before they reject supply side economics?

What of Trump's claims that he'll ensure that manufacturing jobs return to the U.S.? This may be enticing to many conservative working class Americans, but there is little but propaganda in Trump's promise. Short of threatening to revoke corporate charters of American corporations that outsource jobs, or refusing to allow their products back into the U.S. after they've been manufactured abroad, there is little American political elites could probably do to force a return of manufacturing jobs. Suggestions that Trump has the ability (contrary to Congress's wishes) or desire to take the hard steps necessary to rein in corporate power and to stop the decline of U.S. manufacturing are belied by the very nature of his campaign. What reason is there to expect that an American billionaire who shameless promotes his membership in the capitalist class will be willing to engage in the types of anti-capitalist policies necessary to combat the rise of outsourcing?

Trump's growing prominence among conservative working class voters is explained in large party by his playing on the economic anxieties of the masses, despite his failure to develop any coherent agenda for returning American workers to the days "golden era" of post-World War II capitalism. Trump makes no effort to promote an agenda pushing for a higher minimum wage or living wage, for the re-unionization of America, or for greater taxes on the rich, so as to redistribute resources via progressive welfare programs like universal health care or free college tuition. If conservative Americans understood the benefits of these proposals to their own economic bottom line, they'd be voting for Bernie Sanders, not Donald Trump, since these issues define the former's political platform. Rather than offering a real alternative to neoliberalism and outsourcing, Trump preys on pre-existing bigotry and prejudice by simply blaming minorities and foreigners for the decline of the middle class. His diagnosis of society's economic problems are sub-moronic, as those who closely study immigration know that illegal immigration produces far greater financial and economic benefits than costs (for example, increased tax revenues, increased consumer demand for goods and services, and increased economic growth).

The reality of the matter is that Trump's wise populists are not so wise after all. If they understood how badly they were being manipulated by conservative candidates, they would also understand that Trump is the worst sort of candidate of all: the kind that plays on people's economic anxieties, while selling them a bill of goods. Of course, one could say that most all American political officials do this. But the crucial difference between these people and Trump is that the vast majority of Republican and Democratic elites have not been able to brand themselves as populist saviors of the American working class.

So does Trump represent a deviation from the neoliberal status quo? The answer is yes and no. On the one hand, Trump has surely angered Republican and Democratic elites for his willingness (even rhetorically) to challenge the "inherent" virtues of corporate free trade agreements that harm the vast majority of Americans. On another level, Trump's rise is also historic because it suggests how extreme the Republican "mainstream" has become in its lust for political power. Party elites like Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Speaker Paul Ryan are now actively seeking to undermine Trump's presidential candidacy by suggesting that Republicans running for re-election in Congress do everything possible to actively disassociate themselves from Trump. Like rats on a sinking ship, they're desperately trying to divorce the rest of the Republican Party from Trump.

Increasingly, elite party donors are speaking of possibly supporting a third-party challenger to Trump should he win the Republican nomination. These steps – particularly the open rejection by the party of its presidential frontrunner – are unprecedented in modern history, and threaten to break apart the entire party. Primary voters who passionately supported Trump will not forget that party elites sought to actively undermine their preferred candidate at every turn. Republican Senate and House hopefuls that actively talk trash about Trump will probably never again be welcomed with open arms by the Trump faction of Republican Party voters. If Republican elites were not so extreme in their strategies for retaining political power, they could probably weather the Trump storm more easily. What's the likelihood that another larger than life, bombastic billionaire personality like Trump will emerge again in the near future and embarrass national party officials? The prospects are low, which raises the question as to why so many party elites are going out of their way to implode the party via the “defeat Trump at any cost” campaign.

Trump's greatest significance is that he symbolizes the growing inability of party elites to control their increasingly confused and misguided base. Republican voters have been scared to death for years by party officials and Republican media elites that the Obama-boogeyman is coming for them, and that they need to “take their country” back from the minorities, the gays, the secularists, and the liberal commie Marxists. Rightwing talk radio has cultivated crazy via conspiracies and fearmongering for years, particularly following Obama's 2008 election win.

The rightwing echo chamber has been greatly effective in galvanizing the American right into action – too effective. Fearmongering greatly aided *Fox's* ratings for years, and helped the Republican Party win midterm elections in the age of Obama. But Frankenstein's monster is now loose and threatening to derail the entire party. In short, the contemporary Republican Party has become a victim of its own success, selling racism, xenophobia, hatred of the poor, and religious extremism in the name of gaining power. Now they try, disingenuously, to disassociate themselves from these ideas for fear that the public will recognize the party for what it really is. Trump personifies the success of the Republican fear campaign, and now that Pandora's Box is open, there's no way of closing it.

None of this is to suggest that Republican voters are wrong to be angry about what has happened to them in recent decades. The main problem, however, is that these voters retain little more than a vague sense of anger about their current economic state. They know they're being screwed somehow, but do not have the knowledge, education, or ability to figure out *how* it happened, or *what* specific factors caused the decline of the working class. Blue collar Republican voters suffer through individual anxieties, such as the loss of a job, stagnating to declining pay over years and decades, and skyrocketing health care and education costs. But there is little ability, effort or even desire to connect what has happened to them as individuals – via downsizing, outsourcing, the decline of social welfare spending, de-unionization, and tax policies that favor the rich – with the bi-partisan neoliberal capitalist framework that causes growing inequality and middle class decline. Without critically challenging the neoliberal changes in American politics, the growth in inequality and the decline of American workers will only continue. So long as Americans vote for corporate-friendly Democrats and Republicans, there will be little to stop the ascendance of the new gilded age economy. Trump plays on the ignorance of the masses, providing easy answers to society's problems. Trump's success will do nothing to solve society's

problems. Rather, his campaign simply puts a “relatable” face on an authoritarian, fascist approach to U.S. politics that undermines what little is left of American democracy.