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Claremont McKenna College

America After Trump:
The Rise of National Conservatism in the United States, Its Potential for
Electoral Success, and the Future of the Republican Party

submitted to
Professor George Thomas
and
Professor Jon Shields

by
Jensen Steady

for
Senior Thesis
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Abstract

Since Donald Trump's loss in the 2020 presidential election, numerous conservative factions have attempted to fill the void and become dominant within the Republican Party. One of the most visible factions vying for power are the National Conservatives, but this movement has received little examination in academic literature due to its recent formation in 2019. Animated by a vision of nationalism based on historical tradition and the power of the state to push socially conservative goals, National Conservatism represents a distinct political movement that draws on various strands of existing conservative thought, although it does not clearly resemble any of them on its own. At the same time, National Conservatism's international nature and its abstract theorizing leaves many tensions unresolved, especially the problem of determining which historical traditions count in forming nations. Overall, the political potential of National Conservatism appears limited based on current taxonomies and polling of Republican voters and the public at large. The structural advantages for Republicans in the American electoral system and the anxieties that National Conservatism focuses on, however, leave an opening for this or similar movements to gain hold. Creating an alternative framework that attends to Americans' discontent with the liberal order is therefore a necessity.

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Introduction: After Trump

“Donald Trump Is Elected President in Stunning Repudiation of the Establishment,” the New York Times headline shouted in the early morning hours of November 9th, 2016.¹ Politicians, world leaders, and even celebrities chimed in with their overwhelming dismay. The Democratic Party and nominee Hillary Clinton were clearly caught on their back foot, with Clinton waiting to concede the election until the next morning. “I know how disappointed you feel because I feel it too, and so do tens of millions of Americans who invested their hopes and dreams in this effort,” she said in her concession speech. “This is painful and it will be for a long time,” she emphasized.² Comedian Trevor Noah likened Trump’s election to “the end of the world,” and many international leaders said as much, warning that Trump’s election signaled a growing tide against liberalism that would sink the West if Europe did not step up.³ As then-President of France Francois Hollande said, Trump’s views might test “the values and the interests that [France] share[s] with the United States.”⁴ After a heated primary season, though, Republicans seemed to embrace their party’s victory—even if the winning presidential candidate was not their first choice of candidate.

After four years Trump was forced out of the White House. Joe Biden’s election and the looming 2022 midterm elections also continue to make Trump seem more distant every day. Trump’s removal from social media platforms such as Twitter has pushed him even further away

¹ Matt Flegenheimer and Michael Barbaro, “Donald Trump Is Elected President in Stunning Repudiation of the Establishment,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2016, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/us/politics/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-president.html>.

² “Hillary Clinton’s Concession Speech (Full Text),” *CNN Politics*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/09/politics/hillary-clinton-concession-speech/index.html?msclkid=2234b390b2d911ecbd7538dcdc25ff8d>.

³ Elisha Fieldstadt, “Celebrities React to Donald Trump Win,” *CBS News*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/celebrities-react-to-donald-trump-win/>.

⁴ Patrick Healy and Jeremy W. Peters, “Donald Trump’s Victory Is Met With Shock Across a Wide Political Divide,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2016, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/us/politics/donald-trump-election-reaction.html>.

from mainstream discourse, but murmurings of a 2024 run continue bringing his name to the surface. The future of the Republican Party is perhaps more uncertain than ever in recent memory.

To fill this void several new ascendant factions have come to the fore, expanding the possible range of conservative political action in the U.S. Groups from Q-Anon conspiracy to full on Trumpism to the Never Trump movement, and everything in between, are all vying for political power in the current movement. One of the main players among these is National Conservatism, the case for an intellectual Trumpism that has gained some of the most traction in recent months and years, epitomized by a viral November 2021 *Atlantic* piece by David Brooks titled “The Terrifying Future of the American Right.”⁵ Or consider *Vanity Fair*’s recent expose on the “New Right” in which National Conservatism is discussed in-depth.⁶ Even a cautious glance at political media coverage will make National Conservatism in all its various names hard to miss.

Founded by Yoram Hazony, an Israeli Zionist, National Conservatism attempts to combine Trump’s policies with a hyper-focus on nationalism, illiberalism, and intellectual respectability. Although both nationalism, conservatism, and different forms of what would be called national conservatism have existed in the U.S. and around the world long before the 21st century, the modern American National Conservative movement represents an organizationally grounded conservative movement unlike many before it due to its inherently illiberal nature and international structure. These traits are a major reason the movement looms so large in the popular political imagination. As an organization, the National Conservative movement is run by

⁵ David Brooks, “The Terrifying Future of the American Right,” *The Atlantic*, November 18, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/scary-future-american-right-national-conservatism-conference/620746/>.

⁶ James Pogue, “What Peter Thiel, J.D. Vance, and Others Are Learning From Curtis Yarvin and the New Right,” *Vanity Fair*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/04/inside-the-new-right-where-peter-thiel-is-placing-his-biggest-bets>.

the Edmund Burke Foundation, a conservative think tank founded in 2019 amidst the first official National Conservatism conferences in London, Washington, and Rome that year.⁷ The foundation primarily serves as the nonprofit base of the actual movement. Besides multiple annual conferences in the U.S. and abroad, the organization hosts an interview show hosted by Yoram Hazony called NatConTalk, a weekly discussion show called NatCon Squad, and a limited-run seminar series titled “Foundations of National Conservatism.” Each of these make up a core component of the movement, but far and away the conferences are the organization’s most prominent product.

Besides the specific organization and founder, National Conservatism also stands out—and has grabbed significant attention—because of its bold claims about the liberal project that make it stand out compared to other types of conservatism. Compared with constitutional conservatism, for example, National Conservatives are not by definition supporters of America’s current constitutional republic and scoff at elements of the American founding that they believe have been detrimental to modern life. Further, they often support broader intervention than an originalist interpretation of the Constitution would permit, as opposed to constitutional conservatives who believe in a strict interpretation of the Constitution. As opposed to neoconservatives, National Conservatives advocate a dovish foreign policy position. They also despise libertarianism, the ultimate representation of a liberal conservatism—an ideology that celebrates the individual at the cost of society. National Conservatism represents some blending of values from Christian conservatism and social conservatism, although with a much more expansive view of the role of the state.

⁷ “Edmund Burke Foundation | Homepage,” Edmund Burke Foundation, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://burke.foundation/>.

As a rising movement on the right, National Conservatism is important to study both for scholars, but also political actors and anyone who cares about the future of America for at least two reasons. First, consider that National Conservatism is already an influential movement in electoral politics—albeit on a small scale, but growing rapidly. Senate candidates such as J.D. Vance and Josh Mandel are running on key parts of the National Conservative platform, while elected leaders like Ron DeSantis and Ted Cruz are clearly picking up on, or are at least pretending to, popular elements of the movement. If many more National Conservative-aligned politicians begin to run, and some even are elected, understanding the core of the ideology and how it differs from any other conservative movement in modern American history will be crucial to grappling with it.

Second, National Conservatism represents a temperamental shift in conservative politics toward a more combative and hostile stand against the American left. It draws together a number of conservatives who might not otherwise be aligned but are overwhelmingly concerned about American liberalism. To these leaders, liberalism is destroying the foundations of society, as dissolving gender norms, cultural traditions, and any sense of national pride will soon lead to the potential dissolution of the U.S. and creation of a liberal global world order. Liberals are the ultimate threat to civilization, and the movement's inherently illiberal attributes create authoritarian tendencies that are present in some of the movement's writings. As many in America are already concerned about the prospects for the future of American democracy, there are reasonable concerns that an impassioned right that sees the future of America as at risk may do nearly anything to prevent that feared downfall. As much of the movement actively dislikes many features of the American order—an inherently liberal order—it therefore espouses revolutionary logic that prior conservative movements would have disavowed.

For these reasons, National Conservatism is an important political movement that deserves a fair hearing. To create that space, this thesis answers three major questions about National Conservatism. First, what is the National Conservative movement? Second, does its theory of the case make sense? Finally, where does National Conservatism fit into Trumpism and the existing conservative movement, and is there a feasible coalition it can draw on to attain political power?

Chapter 1 focuses on the National Conservative movement as a key player in the post-Trump era of conservatism. By analyzing the founder's work, reading influential National Conservative writings, and watching convention speeches, this thesis explores the main tenets of the National Conservative movement. To do so, this chapter first turns to the influence of Yoram Hazony and his experience in Israel. This thesis then examines the central elements of the movement and dissects exactly what National Conservatism proposes, using Hazony and others' own words to lay out the movement's central claim about the necessity of nationalism and the failures of liberalism.

Chapter 2 wrestles with some of the deep tensions within National Conservatism. First, this chapter takes up the way in which National Conservatism uses hyperbolic rhetoric to tar its opponents and the irony of an international movement attempting to promote nationalism. This international focus is especially important in the context of Hungary, a nation that National Conservatives have pointed to as an ideal nation but bears little resemblance to American historical traditions, making it hard to see why nationalism in America should look anything like nationalism in Hungary. National Conservatism's high level of abstraction also clouds important questions surrounding the rights of minority groups within a nationalist community, as well as context-specific questions about applying these theoretical principles onto countries with varying

histories. Finally, this chapter presents an alternative to National Conservatism's view of nationalism, aiming to tie national unity to civic principles, rather than religious or ethnic bonds.

Chapter 3 turns to the viability of Republican politics centered on National Conservatism. This chapter first situates National Conservatism within the broader context of Trump's rise, dissecting which elements of Trumpism it keeps and which it discards. This thesis then discusses how the Republican Party is reshaping after the Trump era by looking at existing research on current factions within the party. Then, this chapter analyzes polling on issues related to the National Conservative movement, concluding that it is not likely to translate into long-term electoral or political success. Finally, this chapter analyzes how National Conservatism is playing out in American politics today, using several examples to point out some of the movement's key policy initiatives in action, as well as to make the case for the movement's likely dissolution or absorption into the Republican Party in the near future.

In the end, I aim to present a detailed picture of the modern National Conservative movement in the U.S. This paper, however, is not quantitative analysis of the movement or any candidates' political fortunes. Rather, I want to assess whether the National Conservative theory of the case works both in terms of its internal logic and in practice by drawing conclusions from existing polling and real-world political examples. Although Hazony is soon to publish *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*, a manifesto of sorts that summarizes the movement, this thesis seeks to synthesize that information and go beyond it.

Chapter 1: National Conservatism's Theory of the Case

National Conservatism understands that the “past and future of conservatism are inextricably tied to the idea of the nation, to the principle of national independence, and to the revival of the unique national traditions that alone have the power to bind a people together and bring about their flourishing.” In combating both the “excesses of purist libertarianism” and “political theories grounded in race,” National Conservatism situates itself in stark opposition to both the contemporary right and leftist movements by arguing that both neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies have undervalued the capability the state has to shape society for the better through nationalism and conservatism.⁸

Israel's Influence on Yoram Hazony

The founder of the movement, Yoram Hazony, is an Israeli scholar who currently serves as President of the Herzl Institute, a Jerusalem-based think which “aims to contribute to a revitalization of the Jewish people, the State of Israel, and the family of nations through a renewed encounter with the foundational ideas of Judaism.”⁹ After being raised in Israel, Hazony studied as a young scholar at Princeton University where he founded the school's conservative newspaper, the Princeton Tory.¹⁰ “As an undergraduate, Hazony found an intellectual community that inspired his future work. “Each night at dinner, Hazony and his friends—a collection of students from debating circles and campus Zionist groups—would talk about politics, philosophy, and issues of the day... Several of the students planned to move to Israel after

⁸ “About,” National Conservatism, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://nationalconservatism.org/about/>.

⁹ “Institute Mission,” The Herzl Institute, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://herzlinstitute.org/en/institute-mission/>.

¹⁰ “A Brief Look at Our History,” Princeton Tory, accessed April 6, 2022, <http://theprincetontory.com/a-brief-look-at-our-history/>.

graduation, and they often imagined what they would do once they got there.”¹¹ He completed his Ph.D. in Political Theory at Rutgers University in 1993 and then, inspired by his friends at Princeton, moved back to Israel in 1994 to found the Shalem Center.

Shalem operated as an American style-think tank with various components. It became a leading publisher of Western philosophy translated into Hebrew, such as work from Edmund Burke and Friedrich Hayek. It also worked in education, advocating for more Zionism in Israel curriculum. One of Hazony’s closest friends who had helped him found the Princeton Tory explained: “It was clear to us that higher education is the leading force in shaping the way people think—certainly the most influential people in society. And therefore it shapes the future.”¹² As an educational institution, Shalem also housed a number of respected individuals and became a hub for the Likud Party—Israel's dominant right-wing party.¹³ Fairly quickly, the think tank evolved to become Israel's first liberal arts college, beginning with a summer program of 20 students which eventually expanded into a fully accredited university by 2013.¹⁴

The university’s mission was not only education, but the success of the Jewish state itself. After the government approved Shalem College for accreditation, Hazony celebrated the news with an article lauding the importance of a broad liberal arts education in a country such as Israel. He described where Shalem filled the void in Israeli higher education, and warned about what the current state of universities meant for the country “What does this kind of specialized education do to Israeli public life? It means that public discourse on most subjects of importance is conducted at the level of slogans, or not at all,” Hazony warned. “And for Israel, this isn’t a

¹¹ Marilyn H. Marks, “In a Nation’s Service: This New College Has Roots in Princeton, but It Was Created for a Place 5,700 Miles Away,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, January 21, 2016, <https://paw.princeton.edu/article/nations-service-0>.

¹² Marks.

¹³ Marks.

¹⁴ “About Me,” Yoram Hazony, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://www.yoramhazony.org/about/>.

viable lifestyle choice. If you're a small nation at war, being unable to conduct a serious public debate on crucial subjects can be as great a danger as anything your enemies can cook up."¹⁵

Shalem also began publishing a quarterly journal focused on Israeli identity. In its first issue published in 1996, Hazony again turned to themes of national identity. Israel had just come out of an election which saw the rise of nationalist Benjamin Netanyahu by the thinnest of margins, but Hazony still feared for the future of the country. The Israeli left "built farms and factories and fighter planes, among the best in the world. But they did not recognize the need to build the idea of the Jewish state in the minds of the people," Hazony wrote.¹⁶ He continued:

In most countries, the role of defending the idea of the nation—the preservation and deepening of its heritage, its texts and holy places, and the wisdoms and social crafts which its people have acquired—belongs to political conservatives. But Israel has never had an organized political conservatism... no tradition of intellectual discourse to speak of. It has no colleges, no serious think-tanks or publishing houses, no newspapers or broadcasting...¹⁷

For Hazony, the war of ideas is more crucial than any that could be fought on the battlefield. He viewed Israel as a nation teetering on the edge of collapse, and to save it would require significant change. As he saw it, "[T]his brush with ideological decay was needed for the Jews to learn the importance of the *national* idea—and of the political *conservatism* which protects it [emphasis mine]."¹⁸

Hazony left Shalem College to found the Herzl Institute and later the Edmund Burke Foundation with David Brog, the former executive director for Christians United for Israel, the largest pro-Israel organization in the U.S. He founded and became the head of National Conservatism in 2019. In July 2019 the organization held its first official conference in

¹⁵ Yoram Hazony, "Israeli Government Approves Establishment of Shalem College," *JerusalemLetters* (blog), January 14, 2013, <https://jerusalemletters.com/israeli-government-approves-establishment-of-shalem-college/>.

¹⁶ Yoram Hazony, "The End of Zionism?," *Azure* Summer 5756, no. No. 1 (1996), <http://www.azure.org.il/article.php?id=410&page=1>.

¹⁷ Hazony.

¹⁸ Hazony.

Washington, D.C., titled NatCon I. In his speech, Hazony declared “Today I feel good, because I know that today is our independence day. Today we declare independence from neoconservatism, from neoliberalism, from libertarianism, from what they call classical liberalism.”¹⁹

Hazony’s National Conservatism generally follows two central tenets. First, National Conservatism celebrates *nationalism*, opposing globalist governance in apocalyptic terms. Second, National Conservatism highlights *conservative* values that bind a nation, such as heritage, language, and culture, and advocates the state to play a central role in promoting and maintaining those values for citizens. These two elements of the movement blend in many important ways and can often be hard to pull apart.

Nationalism

In *The Virtue of Nationalism*, Hazony’s 2018 bestseller, he lays out his fundamental case for a nationalist state. As he sees it, nationalism is “a principle standpoint that regards the world as governed best when nations are able to chart their own independent course, cultivating their own traditions and pursuing their own interests without interference.”²⁰ This framing places nationalism in the middle of a spectrum with imperialism and anarchism on two ends, with imperialism being a movement that “seeks to bring peace and prosperity to the world by uniting mankind, as much as possible, under a single political regime.”²¹ For Hazony, this dilemma presents an easy choice: either you want to be ruled by overlords, live in chaos, or you want to chart your own course in life through national self-determination.

¹⁹ Yoram Hazony, “Why National Conservatism?” (Speech, National Conservatism Conference 1, Washington, D.C, July 19, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cpyd1OqHJU>.

²⁰ Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism*, First edition (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 3.

²¹ Hazony, 3.

Hazony begins by describing a historical framework for understanding the modern crisis facing countries such as the U.S. and the U.K. He points to the Protestant vision of political life as a solution. First, this vision assumes a “moral minimum required for legitimate government.”²² The second principle is the right of self-determination, meaning that a nation must be “cohesive and strong enough to secure their political independence.”²³

In offering an affirmative case for this second principle, Hazony creates a theory of the birth of the state. He critiques John Locke’s concept of the state of nature by arguing that humans are naturally drawn into associations long before a formal political order is created.²⁴ Of Locke, Hazony writes:

There is no historical context in which Locke’s premises can be said to have been true. Nowhere in history do we find conditions in which human beings are all capable of attaining universal political insight by means of reason alone, are all blessed with perfect freedom and equality, and are all without membership in, and obligation to, any political collectives except those that they have consented to join.²⁵

Considering how widely read and taught Locke is today, Hazony fears that this philosophy is merely a rationale for imperialist Western nations to force Enlightenment-rationalist liberation on other nations. Given Locke’s lack of descriptive premises, this revolution will never be successful because “no human society can ever, in reality, live up to the ideal image of Locke’s state of nature, no matter how much force is applied in the attempt to reshape it.”²⁶

This is because, according to Hazony, humans are not simply individuals in the state of nature looking out only for themselves. Humans do preserve their self-interest, but in addition “are also capable of regarding the aims and interests of a collective or institution of which they

²² Hazony, 24.

²³ Hazony, 24.

²⁴ Hazony, 77.

²⁵ Yoram Hazony, “Locke’s Rationalism and the Future of Political Theory,” *The Political Science Reviewer* 43, no. 1 (2019): 7.

²⁶ Hazony.

are members as their own, and of acting upon these aims and interests even where such actions will be detrimental to their lives and property.”²⁷ He analogizes Locke’s view of human nature as treating the state like a corporation, built on the pursuit of individual interest and mutually beneficial interactions, whereas Hazony argues the state is more like a family, built on bonds of mutual loyalty and love.²⁸

Between an anarchical state where there are bonds of trust but no government to organize them, and an imperialist state that seeks to tyrannically unify all people, is the concept of the *national state*.²⁹ Just like a family, a nation can share collective experiences, such as moments of freedom or pain. “A family that plows with an oxen can have a shared interest in purchasing a tractor,” Hazony provides as an example.³⁰ A nation can also experience shame and other atrocities collectively, such as slavery.³¹

Hazony identifies four virtues of this type of nationhood over the anarchist and imperialist alternatives. First, nations help prevent violence. In an anarchical world dominated by loose clans, the threat of violence is constant and in turns breeds more violence. Hazony claims that national unification changes incentives because the “longing for the freedom and self-determination of the clan or tribe is restrained by an intense desire to achieve the internal integrity of his nation.”³² The nation also creates institutions that can protect against violence, such as a neutral system of law that includes police and courts. In this way, despite a military and warfare sometimes occurring on the periphery of society, national unification creates a “sphere of peace” where communities can thrive.³³

²⁷ Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism*, 63.

²⁸ Hazony, 89.

²⁹ Hazony, 100.

³⁰ Hazony, 104.

³¹ Hazony, 105–6.

³² Hazony, 109.

³³ Hazony, 111.

The second benefit of the nation, Hazony contends, is that it manifests a dislike of imperialism within its citizens. The desire to conquer others is first and foremost an act of recognizing one's own limitations, and rulers of a national state "inherit a political tradition that recognizes the boundaries of the nation and its defensive needs as placing natural limits upon its extension."³⁴ According to Hazony, this filters down to the populace. He cautions that this does not mean the nation cannot be violent, but often this violence is toward the nation rather than directed by it, and when conflict erupts between nations, the political tradition they inherit limits the scale of destruction that these conflicts cause.³⁵

Third, Hazony argues, the nation creates the most opportunity for collective freedom and mutual flourishing. In the nation, competing tribes and clans come together that share a common language in culture. In such a system, "each tribe renounces a measure of its own self-determination, giving up the option of violent responses to the provocations of the other tribes, and exposing itself to the interference of the state" allowing them to "gain great advantages" since war is "driven out to the borders of the state."³⁶ Perhaps more importantly, individuals and tribes start to realize their incentives are aligned with that of the nation and since the nation can achieve far more than any individual group, this creates a greater collective freedom than had previously been possible.³⁷

Finally, Hazony recognizes that the nation creates a competitive political order. An imperialist world is one in which ideology is forced onto groups, while nationalism recognizes that empiricism requires exercising some degree of skepticism. As he explains, "a nationalist politics invites a great debate among the nations, and a world of experiments and learning.

³⁴ Hazony, 111.

³⁵ Hazony, 115.

³⁶ Hazony, 121.

³⁷ Hazony, 122.

Whereas an imperialist politics declares that this debate is too dangerous or too troublesome, and that the time has come to end it.”³⁸ Hazony discusses the historical debate between socialism and capitalism to prove his point. Socialism, like imperialism, assumes the answer and tries to dictate it to the populace, whereas capitalism assumes a skeptical stance and argues that a diversity of economic actors all acting rationally will create the best outcomes.³⁹

Since 2019, Hazony has written extensively in numerous outlets defending his views with a more concrete and contemporary lens. In an article published in 2019, he laments that “Western nations [are] disintegrating before our eyes” because “[t]he most significant institutions that have characterized America and Britain for the last five centuries, giving these countries their internal coherence and stability—the Bible, public religion, the independent national state, and the traditional family... have been, at least since World War II, in precipitous decline.”⁴⁰ Here, Hazony also warns about America’s imperialist project of exporting its version of the Enlightenment to countries that would suffer from its anti-religiosity and anti-traditionalist ideals.⁴¹

Hazony also stresses how liberalism’s main tenets actively promote anti-nationalism, globalism, and imperialism. For example, because liberalism relies on a theory of universal reason in everyone, “liberals tend to believe that any country not already governed as a liberal democracy should be pressed—or even coerced—to adopt this form of government.”⁴² This leads to support for international governing bodies. Further, even the physical borders of a nation are at risk in the liberal order. Liberals believe “there is nothing to be feared in large-scale immigration

³⁸ Hazony, 130.

³⁹ Hazony, 131.

⁴⁰ Yoram Hazony, “Conservative Democracy,” *First Things*, January 2019, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2019/01/conservative-democracy>.

⁴¹ Hazony.

⁴² Ofir Haivry and Yoram Hazony, “What Is Conservatism?,” *American Affairs Journal* 1, no. 2 (May 20, 2017), <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/05/what-is-conservatism/>.

from countries with national and religious traditions very different from ours” whereas nationalists see immigration as something that should be constrained and only allowed for individuals who possess the ability to integrate into the existing culture.⁴³

Much of National Conservatism’s disdain for globalism and support for the nation comes from its conception of national borders. In a manifesto written for *First Things* in March of 2019, the authors, influential writers such as Sohrab Ahmari, Patrick Deneen, and Rod Dreher, argue against what they call a “borderless world.” As they see it, elites can enjoy becoming global citizens in such a future, but the “human need for a common life” creates tension that is “only beginning to surface.” Nationalism, in their view, is the only solution to the inevitability of “universal tyranny” that would be created in such a world.⁴⁴

Christopher DeMuth, former president of the American Enterprise Institute, also highlights the centrality of nationalism and the global order of nations, particularly in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. He asserts that the last two years have demonstrated the failure of experts and technocracy to solve major problems. “It is unnecessary to argue that the United Nations and the World Health Organization proved useless in the crises at hand, for everyone could see that they mainly got in the way, or yakety-yacked while others took urgent action,” DeMuth writes.⁴⁵ These “others” are the nations of the world who “inescapably” were left with the task of managing the pandemic within their own borders. For National Conservatives, a world of nation’s creates a policy laboratory theory, like federalism in the U.S. Because each nation pursued its own emergency response to the pandemic, this diversity yielded strong insights about the most effective response. “We are now coming to understand, better late than

⁴³ Haivry and Hazony.

⁴⁴ Various, “Against the Dead Consensus,” *First Things*, March 21, 2019, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2019/03/against-the-dead-consensus>.

⁴⁵ Christopher DeMuth, “The Nation Is the Heart of the Matter,” *Law & Liberty* (blog), April 7, 2022, <https://lawliberty.org/the-nation-is-the-heart-of-the-matter/>.

never, that comprehensive lockdowns and school closures were largely ineffective in controlling Covid-19 but fabulously costly to our economies and social well-being,” DeMuth argues. “We have gained this understanding precisely because of the knowledge generated by nation-led responses, which would have been obscured by uniform responses directed by the WHO, EU, or the federal government in the United States.”⁴⁶

Russia’s recent invasion of Ukraine has also recently played into the National Conservative idea of the nation. “An imperial power invaded a peaceful self-governing nation for conquest, aiming to seize its territory and farms and industry, to subjugate its people, and to extinguish its traditions and institutions,” DeMuth explains, painting a picture of Russian atrocities. He continues, “That is why Ukraine has become a popular cause around the world,” leading individuals to “reflect on [their] responsibilities for [their] own national home.”⁴⁷ He points to the reversal of globalist energy policies and miniscule defense budgets in many European countries such as Germany, which changed course as they realized these policies were unsustainable. “All of this has been spontaneous collaboration, each nation bringing its unique assets to the cause without the benefit of direction by any supranational body,” DeMuth points out.⁴⁸

National Conservatism leaders also often tie together nationalism and conservatism to demonstrate the necessity of the state. “Man is naturally social and fraternal, and successful nations have learned how to transmute group loyalties into broader allegiance,” DeMuth explains. He articulates: “Citizens understand that their security and freedoms depend on their nation and its imperfect institutions—that their fortunes are linked for better or worse to those of

⁴⁶ DeMuth.

⁴⁷ DeMuth.

⁴⁸ DeMuth.

their disparate compatriots.”⁴⁹ In this way, DeMuth begins to demonstrate how nationalism fits into today’s context, especially in opposition to the leftist and progressive critique of the nation.

He writes:

Many affluent, highly educated Americans who are not hard progressives are imbued with the universal humanitarianism I have mentioned. Well, we have a large and universal canvas of humanity here at home. But that humanity is our countrymen, with rights and responsibilities equal to our own. They have our empathy and support—and also our firm expectations as fellow citizens and teammates. Nationalism, properly understood, is the most potent kind of humanitarianism.⁵⁰

The role of nationalism in National Conservatism is thus a crucial defender of conservative values. According to DeMuth and others, without nationalism, conservatism and any sense of moral values are lost—subsumed by a leftist ideology that threatens civilization. That critique expands beyond just the left, however, as National Conservatism takes issue with the entire project of liberalism.

Conservatism and the Failure of Liberalism

Once one recognizes the role of the nation, what type of culture or heritage is such a system trying to protect? What *conservatism* is worth conserving in a nation? And how does that conservatism stand in opposition to today’s liberalism?

In *The Virtue of Nationalism*, Hazony identifies liberalism as modern imperialism and offers a few possible solutions. First, he turns to the neo-Catholic and neo-nationalist model, but eventually settles on what he calls a conservative (or traditionalist) standpoint. This ideology aims to preserve the two Protestant values that define the nation, particularly the second principle

⁴⁹ Christopher DeMuth, “Why America Needs National Conservatism,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 2021, sec. Opinion, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/national-conservatism-socialist-progressives-woke-crt-patriotism-social-media-border-11636738833>.

⁵⁰ DeMuth.

that says that the government must provide a “moral minimum,” the “protection of his people in their life, family, and property, to justice in the courts, to the maintenance of the sabbath, and to the public recognition of the one God.”⁵¹ He specifically points to Anglo-American conservative tradition as the strongest of these conservative groups.⁵² It is this “principles of limited executive powers, individual liberties, public religion based on the Bible, and a historical empiricism that has so often served to moderate political life in Britain and American in comparison with that of other countries.”⁵³ The key, then, for Hazony is that such a tradition “has worked so well to encourage the flourishing of the United States, Britain, and other English-speaking nations.”⁵⁴

In his book *Why Liberalism Failed*, Patrick Deneen—a regular participant in conferences and active National Conservative—offers an organizing thesis for the movement, primarily by identifying and fleshing out Hazony’s main issues with liberalism and promoting an affirmative case for an illiberal conservative order. Deneen sees liberalism as a self-destructive cycle built on two foundational attributes: “anthropological individualism and the voluntarist conception of choice” and “human separation from and opposition to nature.”⁵⁵

Thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and Locke argue that the “legitimacy of all human relationships... becomes increasingly dependent on whether those relationships have been chosen, and chosen on the basis of their service to rational self interest.”⁵⁶ Just like Hazony, Deneen denies the descriptive nature of these theories, pointing out they are simply normative assertions that hold no basis in reality and actually displace existing natural understandings of the self and one’s relation to others. Essentially, through individualism and voluntarism, liberalism

⁵¹ Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism*, 24.

⁵² Hazony, 53.

⁵³ Hazony, 54.

⁵⁴ Hazony, 54.

⁵⁵ Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, Paperback edition (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 2018), 31.

⁵⁶ Deneen, 32.

declares there is no particular concept of the good and individuals may pursue their own rational path, which Deneen argues teaches people to “hedge commitments and adopt flexible relationships and bonds.”⁵⁷

Deneen cites human conquest of nature as the second quality of liberalism that ails it. He identifies the conservative wave of scientific and economic mastery over human life and the following liberal wave of “transhumanism” that argued this mastery could extend to human nature itself. Liberalism argues that to pursue this transformation, one must become an autonomous individual acting freely.⁵⁸ This means the state must become larger to create such a sphere, requiring “liberation from all forms of associations and relationships, from family to church, from schools to village and community, that exerted control over behavior through informal and habituated expectations and norms.”⁵⁹ In this society, cultivating self-restraint entirely disappears and the culture itself promotes “hedonic titillation, visceral crudeness, and distraction, all oriented toward promoting consumption, appetite, and detachment.”⁶⁰

Liberalism therefore creates a degraded culture of individualism that actively destroys cultural conservatism. For example, Deneen argues that such a society destroys norms of modesty and respect in school. Further, it makes sex into a utilitarian pursuit devoid of courtship or romance. Marriage becomes a transaction, not even necessarily between one man and one woman, but in an assortment of ways depending on what autonomous individuals decide. Children become a drag on one’s liberty and the environment and economy become tools of increased consumption at almost any cost.⁶¹ Deneen identifies the modern emphasis on identity, especially sexual and gender identity, as another unfortunate consequence of liberalism.

⁵⁷ Deneen, 34.

⁵⁸ Deneen, 34–37.

⁵⁹ Deneen, 38.

⁶⁰ Deneen, 39.

⁶¹ Deneen, 39.

Elimination of gender norms, transgender individuals, and even practices such as surrogate mothers are all evidence of a diseased culture fostered by liberalism.⁶² Thus old norms and institutions that shape behavior are cast aside and society suffers as a result. There is no longer any sense of the good; whatever the individual chooses is right. “This aspiration requires that no truly hard choices be made. There are only different lifestyle options,” Deneen complains.⁶³

Where the ideology draws on a preliberal inheritance, it destroys foundational elements of society that would otherwise be able to counter liberalism. This includes many elements of civil society, such as the loosening of social bonds, the centralization of government, more globalization and impersonal capitalism, and a focus on the state or market to solve problems that were once taken up at the local level.⁶⁴ Most insidiously, perhaps, liberalism becomes invisible to the people living within it, “much as a computer’s operating system goes largely unseen—until it crashes.”⁶⁵ Ultimately, Deneen casts liberalism as a “wager that it can produce more benefits than the cost it would amass, all the while rendering liberal humanity widely insensate to the fact that the mounting costs are the result of those touted benefits.”⁶⁶

Even liberal scholars such as Michael Sandel have long pointed to similar problems in America, although he refrains from many of the more conservative solutions. Sandel contrasts the liberalism that Deneen identifies with his preferred alternative, civic republicanism.⁶⁷ This republicanism involves “deliberating with fellow citizens about the common good and helping to shape the destiny of the political community,” requiring that citizens have more than just the ability to pursue their chosen ends. Rather, the state and institutions must choose what is good

⁶² Deneen, xix–xx.

⁶³ Deneen, 40.

⁶⁴ Deneen, 30.

⁶⁵ Deneen, 5.

⁶⁶ Deneen, 30.

⁶⁷ Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*, 1. Harvard Univ. Press paperback ed (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), 4.

and then transmute that to its people, creating a citizenry with “a knowledge of public affairs and also a sense of belonging, a concern for the whole, a moral bond with the community whose fate is at stake.”⁶⁸

Consider the similarity between Sandel’s words about the importance of community-level bonds with Hazony’s declaration of what ails America today. Liberalism, Hazony argues, is formed by three main tenets. First, liberalism contends that humans can consult a universal reason that holds universal truths. Second, liberalism argues individuals are all born free and equal. Finally, liberalism advocates that no individuals have obligations until they take them on by their own consent.⁶⁹ Instead of creating a world where people are free to pursue their own ends in a way that actually maximizes well-being, Hazony contends that this liberal system instead “has brought about the dissolution of... fundamental traditional institutions” such as religion, nationalism, and the family.⁷⁰ This creates a world without mutual bonds or trust and a society which gives no credence to religious or national tradition and instead banishes them from the public square.⁷¹

National Conservatism takes this critique of liberalism and uses it to attack Democratic and progressive ideology on two fronts. First, the movement sees liberalism as especially responsible for the rise of cultural issues focused on identity—ideas Deneen would call “unnatural.” For National Conservatives, “[t]he fetishizing of autonomy paradoxically yielded the very tyranny that consensus conservatives claim most to detest.”⁷² Individualism promoted by liberalism leads to a degraded culture that flouts conservative values. It allows for “dehumanizing attempts at ‘liberation’ such as pornography, ‘designer babies,’ wombs for rent,

⁶⁸ Sandel, 5.

⁶⁹ Hazony, “Conservative Democracy.”

⁷⁰ Hazony.

⁷¹ Hazony.

⁷² Various, “Against the Dead Consensus.”

and the severing of the link between sex and gender.”⁷³ Opposition to all forms of abortion also plays a central role in this conservatism, with National Conservatives arguing that millennials are in fact the most pro-life generation and that Republicans should stop compromising on social issues.⁷⁴ Josh Hammer, a fellow at the Edmund Burke Foundation and an opinion editor with Newsweek, writes that the destruction of America is being wrought by the “transgender phenomenon, or poisonous multiculturalism threatening to further divide an already-divided people on the other hand, such as critical race theory.”⁷⁵ DeMuth writes that the left is harming society by “elevating group identity above citizenship; fomenting racial, ethnic and religious divisions... [and] defaming our national history as a story of unmitigated injustice.”⁷⁶

National Conservatism also emphasizes the role of the state in the economy, in contrast to libertarian conservatives who promote deregulation and lower taxes. This usually takes two forms: opposition to corporate oligarchy and support for American workers. In their contempt for corporations who they claim are misaligned with proper societal social values, National Conservatism trends sharply against traditional Republican orthodoxy. As Hammer argues:

Republicans’ decades-long fixation on corporate deregulation as an end to be pursued unto itself has helped collapse the “public”/“private” distinction and abet the rise of a new sociocorporate tyranny. Woke capitalists rule the roost on Wall Street, using engorged economic clout to fight the culture war with the aim of defeating their enemy: us. In Silicon Valley, monopolist robber barons who despise us, but control the terms of our 21st-century public square nonetheless, unduly benefit from neoliberal-inspired antitrust theorizing and caselaw advancing an overly narrow view of antitrust law’s so-called “consumer welfare standard.”⁷⁷

⁷³ Various.

⁷⁴ Various.

⁷⁵ Josh Hammer, “The Only Path Forward Is National Conservatism,” *The American Conservative*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-only-path-forward-is-national-conservatism/>.

⁷⁶ DeMuth, “Why America Needs National Conservatism.”

⁷⁷ Hammer, “The Only Path Forward Is National Conservatism.”

What does this translate to in terms of policy? Consider an area like technology companies. “Digital life saps our humanity and undermines the common good—and the Big Tech robber barons are avowed enemies of our traditional values, to boot,” Hammer argues. For many, therefore, using the tax and regulatory code to harm these industries is a worthwhile policy goal.⁷⁸

The movement also takes a decided pro-worker stance that pushes against liberalism’s view of immigration and an impersonal economy. Where they see liberals as arguing that “working-class Americans are less hard-working, less fertile, in some sense less worthy than potential immigrants,” National Conservatives retort that “[t]hey are our fellow citizens, not interchangeable economic units.”⁷⁹ As Hammer explains, “[d]ecades of unfettered movement of goods, capital, and labor have torn asunder the very fabric and sinews of all our most important institutions: the nation-state, the church and synagogue, and the family.”⁸⁰ In the end, National Conservatives argue that the U.S. needs to work for workers, and that Trump—despite some of his flaws—was at least right on this issue, and it was a central reason he was able to assemble his coalition.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Hammer.

⁷⁹ Various, “Against the Dead Consensus.”

⁸⁰ Hammer, “The Only Path Forward Is National Conservatism.”

⁸¹ Various, “Against the Dead Consensus.”

Chapter 2: Tensions Within National Conservatism

Both nationalism and conservatism play a vital role in National Conservatism's vision of politics. Thinking more deeply about these tenets, and the overall organization and its philosophy, however, begin to surface many tensions. The movement's caricature of the existing Democratic Party and popularity and power of the American progressive movement create a boogeyman that may provide rhetorical firepower for the movement but fails to give a grounded account of the state of American political and cultural decay. Further, the international nature of the organization, as well as intentional abstraction from specific discussions and the potential problems of nationalism in different contexts, create tricky questions that National Conservatives have a hard time answering. In thinking about nationalism in this context, this chapter concludes by drawing on previous scholarship to present an alternative framework of nationalism focused on civic bonds, as opposed to religious or ethnic ties.

International Nationalism and the Caricature of American Politics

What calls itself a nationalist movement is really an international one. Conferences in Rome, Budapest, and all around the world evidence this, as well as serious intellectuals in Europe and other countries who continue to feed the movement. Consider that Yoram Hazony, an Israeli, is the primary leader of an organization that focuses much of its energy on American politics. For Hazony, the problems facing Israel provide a lesson in the strength and necessity of nationalism in all countries, but can an international intellectual movement really promote the nationalist values it espouses?

Many might posit that an international movement for National Conservatism is a practical necessity because of the state of liberalism. As Michael Anton, a former senior national security

official in the Trump administration and senior fellow at the Claremont Institute famously wrote in his “Flight 93” essay for the Claremont Review of Books, the state of the American left makes it so that any leader—even Trump—is better than a left-leaning leader that would surely lead to the demise of the country:

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.⁸²

For Anton, a Clinton presidency would have been “pedal-to-the-metal on the entire Progressive-left agenda... coupled with a level of vindictive persecution against resistance and dissent.”⁸³ Fighting back against Clinton at nearly all costs, therefore, was necessary. If Democrats gained power, Anton feared the worst. “Among the many things the ‘Right’ still doesn’t understand is that the Left has concluded that this particular show need no longer go on. They don’t think they need a foil anymore and would rather dispense with the whole bother of staging these phony contests in which each side ostensibly has a shot.”⁸⁴ In essence, Anton argued that a Clinton victory would lead to an authoritarian takeover of America.

This tirade against leftism as an all-consuming force that represents death to America continues to be omnipresent in National Conservatism today, and is perhaps best exemplified in Hillsdale College’s Glenn Ellmer’s hit piece for *The American Mind*. Titled “‘Conservatism’ is no Longer Enough,” Ellmers bluntly states that “most people living in the United States today—certainly more than half—are not Americans in any meaningful sense of the term.” It becomes clear quite quickly how Ellmers distinguishes these groups. “By and large, I am

⁸² Michael Anton, “The Flight 93 Election,” *Claremont Review of Books*, September 5, 2016, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/digital/the-flight-93-election/>.

⁸³ Anton.

⁸⁴ Anton.

referring to the 75 million people who voted in the last election against the senile figurehead of a party that stands for mob violence, ruthless censorship, and racial grievances, not to mention bureaucratic despotism,” he says, in reference to those that voted against Joe Biden in 2020.⁸⁵ The only true Americans are those that voted for Trump, or perhaps more accurately, the coalition that opposes Democrats and wokeism.

For Ellmers, progressives have rotted all public and private institutions to the point that America needs a refounding. This refounding calls upon National Conservatism, although not directly. “In almost every case, the political practices, institutions, and even rhetoric governing the United States have become hostile to both liberty and virtue,” he explains. “On top of that, the mainline churches, universities, popular culture, and the corporate world are rotten to the core.”⁸⁶ Real Americans, Ellmers contends, “want to work, worship, raise a family, and participate in public affairs without being treated as insolent upstarts in their own country.” This theory of defeating wokeism, therefore, calls upon National Conservatism’s ideals, arguing that only “all hands on deck” in the coming “counter-revolution” will be enough to save the U.S.⁸⁷ According to National Conservatives, then, this all-out approach must require international solidarity to have any shot at success.

This perception of the American left, though, is a caricature of American politics. A cursory glance at the main leaders of both political parties, even including prior potential leaders such as Hillary Clinton, put to rest any worry that either Democrats or Republicans want to create a global international order or destroy America in the process. Joe Biden, the most moderate candidate in the 2020 Democratic primary field, was elected president and the

⁸⁵ Glenn Ellmers, “‘Conservatism’ Is No Longer Enough,” *The American Mind*, March 24, 2021, <https://americanmind.org/salvo/why-the-claremont-institute-is-not-conservative-and-you-shouldnt-be-either/>.

⁸⁶ Ellmers.

⁸⁷ Ellmers.

Democratic Party appears to consistently lose ground whenever they move away from core economic issues and pursue the progressive agenda that National Conservatives fear.⁸⁸ Both Democrats and Republicans also usually align on core national issues such as support for the military,⁸⁹ and America as a whole repeatedly demonstrates concern over issues that would be detrimental to national security and the nation as a whole, such as border security.⁹⁰ The political reality in America contradicts the caricature of a global internationalist elite in the Democratic Party that would try to dissolve the U.S., or turn it into an autocracy, if given the opportunity.

The Hungary Obsession

The international community that defines National Conservatism draws on several different countries and contexts to provide examples of what an ideal nationalism would look like, especially focusing on Hungary as a strong example. This emphasis on Hungarian-style conservatism has gained mainstream support in recent years as well, with even Fox News host Tucker Carlson traveling to the country and filming a special episode of his show there in 2021.⁹¹ In its effort to do so, though, National Conservatism is attempting to define what nationalism should look like by the example of one specific nation—making it hard to see how such a context-specific case could tell us much about what needs to be done in America.

The most active proponent of Hungarian-style illiberal democracy in the U.S. is Rod Dreher of *The American Conservative*. Dreher has long argued that woke ideas, especially those focused on race and gender, are leading to a steep cultural decline in America. Hungary, for him,

⁸⁸ Jonathan Martin, “A Pollster’s Warning to Democrats: ‘We Have a Problem,’” *The New York Times*, December 2, 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/02/us/politics/midterm-election-polls.html>.

⁸⁹ Gallup, “American Pride Hits New Low; Few Proud of Political System,” Gallup, July 2, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/259841/american-pride-hits-new-low-few-proud-political-system.aspx>.

⁹⁰ Gabriela Schulte, “Poll: Large Majority Say Situation at the Border Is a ‘Crisis,’” *The Hill*, March 22, 2021, <https://thehill.com/hilltv/what-americas-thinking/544391-poll-majority-say-surge-at-the-border-a-crisis/>.

⁹¹ Nicole Hemmer, “Why Tucker Carlson Went to Hungary,” CNN, August 5, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/05/opinions/tucker-carlson-hungary-viktor-orbn-hemmer/index.html>.

is an example of a country that has managed to battle that tide that is sweeping America and across Western Europe. Under Prime Minister Viktor Orban, the key to this “success” has been the enforcement of an illiberal nationalist order that prioritizes Christian nationalism, anti-LGBT and anti-immigration policies, among a number of others. For Dreher, the recipe for nationalist success in Hungary is pursuing policies related to its own national tradition. As he explains:

The point is that if you want to understand why Hungarians think the way they do — about the EU, about immigration, and about many other things — you have to be aware of this history: the history of a distinct Central European people, with their own unique language, having to battle constantly against being conquered and having their identity and agency subsumed by the invaders. This does not make the Hungarians right about this or that issue, but it does help you understand their perspective.⁹²

For example, Orban is a strong proponent of Christianity within Hungary, arguing that it is his “Christian duty” to do so because of Hungary’s intimate history of being attacked by outside forces who despised Christianity.⁹³

Dreher’s supposition that Hungary may not be right about every issue sounds reasonable on its face but is largely a deflection from the reality that National Conservatism idolizes virtually all of Hungary’s policies and would prefer an America that looks quite similar. As Rod Dreher tweeted shortly after Orban won reelection in April 2022, “Make no mistake: #ViktorOrban is the leader of the West now -- the West that still remembers what the West is.”⁹⁴ Herein lies the tension: the movement espouses each nation should pursue its own nationalist ends but is inherently international and already presupposes what those national values should be for any nation, or at least that all Western nations share identical national traditions.

⁹² Rod Dreher, “What Is Hungarian Conservatism?,” *The American Conservative*, January 8, 2022, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/balazs-orban-hungarian-conservatism/>.

⁹³ Rod Dreher, “Viktor Orban And The Future Of The West,” *The American Conservative*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/viktor-orban-future-of-the-west/>.

⁹⁴ Rod Dreher [@roddreher], “Make No Mistake: #ViktorOrban Is the Leader of the West Now -- the West That Still Remembers What the West Is.,” Tweet, *Twitter*, April 3, 2022, <https://twitter.com/roddreher/status/1510746411591159816>.

Take the U.S. as an example. Many National Conservatives assume that National Conservatism in America should look like Hungary, with an emphasis on Christianity, traditional social values, and opposition to immigration on top of other traditional conservative positions. America itself, though, is a country born out of liberal traditions, with an emphasis placed on openness to immigration, multiculturalism, religious tolerance, and other liberal qualities. In America's case, taking cues from Hungary in learning how to build a nation might be *contradictory* to the national traditions that America upholds, and therefore might not be a nationalist position at all.

This is especially evident in National Conservatives' focus on immigration. As Hazony, DeMuth, and others have vigorously argued, immigration in America needs to be limited, and if allowed at all only for those who are able to integrate and conform to the existing culture.⁹⁵ But this view of the necessity of restricting immigration is at odds with America's cultural and political traditions. Unlike most other countries in the world, America's historical tradition is one of accepting large amounts of immigrants. Hungary's decision to promote Christianity relies on its history of being invaded in religious crusades, and Dreher and other National Conservatives suggest that other countries such as America should rely on similar historical, political, and cultural traditions to guide their thinking on how to form a nationalism that can unify a country. The fact that America's tradition is one of openness to immigration, however, flips the table on National Conservatives by suggesting that America's nationalism can be found in accepting not *less*, but potentially *more* immigrants.

This tradition of openness to immigration, although tested significantly in recent years, remains an unmistakably central part of American culture. Consider that the U.S. has by far the most immigrants of any country in the world, with around one-fifth of all migrants living in

⁹⁵ Haivry and Hazony, "What Is Conservatism?"; DeMuth, "The Nation Is the Heart of the Matter."

America.⁹⁶ Today, two-thirds of Americans say that immigrants strengthen the country “because of their hard work and talents.”⁹⁷ Further, for the first time in the history of Gallup's polling on immigration, in 2021 more respondents answered that they preferred increased levels of immigration rather than decreasing immigration levels.⁹⁸ If National Conservatives believe that nationalism is inherently a national project based on context-dependent traditions, and not an international project where policies preferred in one country such as Hungary are pushed onto others, the movement must wrestle with America’s deep liberal tradition.

Abstraction from National Contexts

On top of the contradictory nature of an international movement that attempts to promote nationalism for all countries, National Conservatism often operates in abstractions that conceal potential problems with its theory. One way this is evident is in its failure to acknowledge the pitfalls of nationalism, especially the danger that nationalism can create for a nation’s minority populations. As one magazine put it, “[a]lthough national conservatism isn’t inherently xenophobic, it offers a useful paradigm for far-right groups who define their conception of the nation-state based on race, religion, and identity.”⁹⁹ In doing so, the nation itself becomes oppositional to, and perhaps entirely uninhabitable by, various religious, ethnic, or other minority populations.

In Hungary, this type of subjugation of ethnic minorities is less common because of the country’s strict immigration policies and the lack of large ethnic minority groups. This tension

⁹⁶ Abby Budiman, “Key Findings about U.S. Immigrants,” Pew Research Center, August 20, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/20/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/>.

⁹⁷ Budiman.

⁹⁸ Gallup, “Immigration,” Gallup, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1660/Immigration.aspx>.

⁹⁹ Mattia Ferraresi, “Nationalists Claim They Want to Redefine Conservatism, but They’re Not Sure What It Is,” *Foreign Policy*, April 10, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/10/nationalism-conservatism-hungary-viktor-orban/>.

becomes more apparent, however, in the country's treatment of LGBT Hungarians. According to Dreher, Orban's logic is simple: LGBT citizens exist and should be allowed in the country, but they should not receive the explicit right of marriage, for example, because such a legal right is traditionally reserved for heterosexual couples. According to Dreher:

Orban said the way to think about Hungary's approach is not to think about LGBT people per se, but about how they fit into a society that prioritizes the natural family, and traditional marriage... He pointed out that in Hungary, gays and lesbians are guaranteed civil partnerships in law, but they cannot have formal marriage. That is reserved for one man and one woman, because that is what marriage and family is. 'In Hungarian society we always make a distinction between love and marriage,' Orban said. 'If they coincide, great, but love is love; family is an institution.' His point is that it is possible to be tolerant, and to create a space in Hungarian law where gay people's lives can be made easier, while at the same time prioritizing what has worked...¹⁰⁰

Dreher's point is that religious, ethnic, or in this case sexual minorities can exist, but may not be granted the rights bestowed on other dominant groups. To National Conservatives, there exists some middle ground where both national traditions can be upheld, and minorities can be carved out a space within a nation to live.

The historical mistreatment of minorities in nations such as the U.S., Israel, and Hungary, and which to some extent and to varying degrees continue today, however, provides little comfort that National Conservatism will provide any substantive protection to these groups. Recent legislation in Hungary that bans teaching about LGBT issues in schools exemplifies this problem.¹⁰¹ A nation cannot claim to accept citizens of all stripes while ignoring the humanity of entire groups of its population. As it stands, National Conservatism's answer to this question is

¹⁰⁰ Dreher, "Viktor Orban And The Future Of The West."

¹⁰¹ Reuters, "Hungary's Anti-LGBTQ Law Breaches International Rights Standards - European Rights Body," *Reuters*, December 14, 2021, sec. Europe, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungarys-anti-lgbtq-law-breaches-international-rights-standards-european-rights-2021-12-14/>.

muddled, perhaps because there is an irresolvable tension between nationalism and the rights of minorities if that nationalism is defined in religious, ethnic, or other similar terms.

National Conservatism's abstract nature also gives it cover in its critique of American liberalism. The U.S. is an inherently liberal constitutional republic that places value on multiculturalism in a variety of forms, and National Conservatism's critique of that liberalism leaves much to be desired. The caricature of the American left, and more broadly the American liberal project, by Hazony, Deneen, and others, ignores the specific context the Founding Fathers realized America's existence within. The Founders themselves were not simply Lockean thinkers who saw the world in individualistic terms. In fact, they were aware of many of the most important elements of a strong nation: the civic and cultural attributes that bind a people together. In general, National Conservatism never wrestles with how the Founders and others form a national identity *within their specific contexts* and the constraints that those contexts impose. Not every nation's nationalism is going to look like Hungary's, and perhaps National Conservatives need to accept that.

Although Hazony advocates America returning to an Anglo-American conservative tradition rooted in a public religion of Protestantism and centralized social mores, thinkers such as Deneen suggest increasingly abstract—but also more radical proposals. Deneen clearly perceives the American project itself as a mostly misguided adventure that was bound to destroy itself. In *Why Liberalism Failed*, he suggests that a return to more localized communities is the only solution. Today, these would be labeled “counterculture” movements, such as Amish or other types of communities that actively pursue culture-building focused on shared practices, self-governance, and civic participation.¹⁰² Deneen especially prizes a focus on “household economics” where the “ability to do and make things for oneself” is prized above consumption

¹⁰² Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 192–93.

and local exchange is favored over the depersonalized global free market system which only encourages excessive consumption and communal decay.¹⁰³ Finally, these transitions in economic systems must also be accompanied by the development of more capable self-governance. “What we need today are practices fostered in local settings, focused on the creation of new and viable cultures, economics grounded in virtuosity within households, and the creation of civic polis life,” Deneen concludes.¹⁰⁴

What is a compelling vision in some respects, also remains deeply abstract and hard to grasp in concrete terms. Americans are clearly not ready to become members of an Amish group and forgo all the material benefits that the American liberal order has brought them. Even considering that this might be desirable places Deneen in an odd position. Rather than supporting the existing American order, Deneen seems to actively argue that the American project was problematic from the beginning and requires dramatic reshaping to save humanity from the perils of liberalism. Such an argument, in some respects, is revolutionary and therefore deeply at odds with conservatism at a basic level. If National Conservative’s contend that the American left is a revolutionary movement that runs counter to American prosperity because of its radical demands for racial, gender, or other types of justice, National Conservatives must also defend their own ideas’ radical conclusions.

Civic Nationalism

In the end, both the international nature of the movement and its abstract theoretical approach create a vision of nationalism that is both untailored to any specific time or place and fails to consider the context-specific qualities of countries that might shape nations’ identities.

¹⁰³ Deneen, 193–94.

¹⁰⁴ Deneen, 197.

One potential solution lies in the promise of civic nationalism. Keeping some of what National Conservatives prioritize in nationalism, civic nationalism argues that a national identity can exist within a liberal nation. That identity, however, must be centered around civic principles rather than the religious or ethnic principles that thinkers such as Hazony consider crucial to nation-building. Instead of assuming that the Anglo-American conservatism derived from Protestant thought is only maintainable through the religion itself, civic nationalism argues that the treasured cultural elements and characteristics of Protestantism can be largely separated from the religion and imbued upon citizens of a nation—regardless of their religious beliefs.

Authors such as Noah Pickus have developed more comprehensive accounts of what a civic nationalism would look like. In Pickus’s vision, civic nationalists both recognize that “a robust national identity is required to bind Americans” but also that “America is based on neither racial nor religious superiority.”¹⁰⁵ Pickus promotes a civic nationalism drawing from Randolph Bourne, Teddy Roosevelt, and James Madison. Bourne advocated a multicultural nationalism that recognizes the beauty of multiculturalism in America and contends that mutuality will occur between different groups as America continues to evolve and groups constantly interact with each other.¹⁰⁶ Roosevelt civic nationalists by contrast believe more strongly in holding up America as a melting pot where immigrants must conform to America’s cultural norms if they wish to immigrate.¹⁰⁷ Both of these approaches face serious challenges: Bourneian civic nationalists perhaps promote a fluid civic identity that is insufficient to properly bind a nation, and Rooseveltian nationalists may underestimate the potential of an already globalized world to put extensive pressure on some fixed American identity.¹⁰⁸ Madison offers a balance between

¹⁰⁵ Noah M. Jedidiah Pickus, *True Faith and Allegiance: Immigration and American Civic Nationalism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 147.

¹⁰⁶ Pickus, 148.

¹⁰⁷ Pickus, 148–50.

¹⁰⁸ Pickus, 151.

these two: a civic nationalism that requires defined community and rights, but is attentive to illiberal tendencies, focuses on institutional design, and could pay attention to the role civil society plays in creating a binding national identity.¹⁰⁹

According to Pickus, today's challenge of creating a national identity is difficult "in the absence of a dominant culture, ethnic identity, or consensus on the meaning of constitutional values." Nonetheless, he argues "Americans possess... a real history, 'a record of specific tragedies, successes, failures, contradictions, and provincial conceits.' Where Madison had, in part, to invent a history of unity, civic nationalists today can draw on a rich national narrative, a central theme of which is the extension of citizenship to those previously excluded from it." He concedes that "[e]quality is not the only theme in that storyline, and a civic nation need not extend citizenship to the whole world. But for naturalized and native-born citizens the American narrative offers a powerful sense of belonging" as well as a promise of "equal rights, vibrant public institutions, shared social interactions, and public values."¹¹⁰ This is the type of nationalism that America could reasonably build, and stands in contrast to the religious and often ethnic framing from National Conservatives such as Hazony.

¹⁰⁹ Pickus, 162–63.

¹¹⁰ Pickus, 164.

Chapter 3: National Conservatism in the Republican Party and American Politics

Given National Conservatism's astronomical rise since 2019, the question remains, however, how the movement fits into and navigates Trumpism and the broader Republican landscape. Since Trump left office, there has been no shortage of punditry concerning the fate of the GOP heading into the 2022 midterms and 2024 presidential election. National Conservatism draws on many of the same political goals as Trump while simultaneously creating a more intellectual appearance and attempting to distance itself from Trumpism.

Within the existing research and polling of the various factions within the Republican Party, National Conservatism draws on elements of populist factions as well as religious and other nationalist factions. This makes it hard to specifically pin down, especially when considering its current pro-intellectual Trump-neutral ethos. In the end, National Conservatism fails to draw from clear bases of support within the existing Republican base, both in terms of its relation to other identified subgroups within the party, but also in considering its policy views and their popularity with the conservatives and the public at large. Application of National Conservatism in American politics by the likes of J.D. Vance, Josh Mandel, and Ron DeSantis all appear occasionally promising for the movement—if limited in scope and potentially unattributable to National Conservative ideology anyway. Opportunist political actors have also flocked to National Conservatism, with the potential for the movement to lose much of its ideological coherence and visibility.

A New Trumpism?

National Conservatism has grown exponentially since 2019—during which time Donald Trump lost the presidency, was banned indefinitely from Twitter, and has generally lost salience in the public consciousness. In comparing National Conservatism to Trumpism, there are three dimensions of concern. First and most broadly, does National Conservatism share Trump’s vision of politics? Second and more specifically, are the policy views that National Conservatives espouse similar to Trump’s agenda? Finally, does National Conservatism actively brand and align itself with Trump?

In comparing the movement’s broad ideological vision with Trump’s, there are clearly ideological similarities that drive both. For example, National Conservatism draws from perhaps Trump’s most notorious quality—his “own the libs” ethos, although in a more refined way. In a world of polarization, denigrating Democrats through targeted smears, memes, and other insults excited the Republican base and allowed Trump to consolidate support in surprising ways. As Politico asserts, “[i]nasmuch as there was a coherent belief that explained [Trump’s] agenda, it was lib-owning—whether that meant hobbling NATO, declining to disavow the QAnon conspiracy theory, floating the prospect of a fifth head on Mount Rushmore (his, naturally), or using federal resources to combat the New York Times’ ‘1619 Project.’”¹¹¹ This attitude is perhaps best summarized not even by Trump. On election night 2020, Republican Madison Cawthorn—after winning his race in North Carolina after trolling Democrats with his rhetoric throughout the campaign—promptly tweeted “Cry more, lib.”¹¹²

¹¹¹ Derek Robertson, “How ‘Owning the Libs’ Became the GOP’s Core Belief,” POLITICO, March 21, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/03/21/owning-the-libs-history-trump-politics-pop-culture-477203>.

¹¹² Madison Cawthorn [@CawthornforNC], “Cry More, Lib.,” Tweet, *Twitter*, November 4, 2020, <https://twitter.com/CawthornforNC/status/1323813315169165313>.

This “own the libs” mentality has a darker side that points to Trumpism as a more problematic political phenomenon. Trumpism’s attitude, just like National Conservatism, is born out of a fear of liberalism, particularly the fear of liberalism destroying culture, norms, and traditional conservative values that were once the bedrock of society and created mutual bonds and obligations that are necessary for human flourishing. In this way, Trump and National Conservatives use the fear of progressivism and leftism as the primary motivating force behind their ideology. National Conservatism, and Trumpism, is not inherently necessary as a political force on its own but is necessary as a response to an amalgamation of progressive political ideology that has captured cultural institutions, corporations, and politics—also known as wokeism.

National Conservatives such as Christopher DeMuth point out this crisis on the American left time and time again. “[T]oday’s woke progressivism isn’t reformist. It seeks not to build on the past but to promote instability, to turn the world upside-down,” DeMuth argues. He continues:

In 2020, they took the side of lawbreakers. Last year, congressional progressives not only rejected Sen. Tim Scott’s police reforms but vilified and degraded him. This year they vilify any Democrat whose spending plan is less than revolutionary. Compromise is antithetical to their goals and methods. When the leftward party in a two-party system is seized by such radicalism, the conservative instinct for moderation is futile and may be counterproductive.¹¹³

At National Conservatism’s second annual conference in Orlando, dubbed NatCon II, Rachel Bovard, Senior Director of Policy at the Conservative Partnership Institute, harped especially on this grievance against wokeism. “The power and ambition of this country’s elite class really is an existential threat to this nation. They hate us. They hate America,” she declared. Later in her speech, she said that “woke elites—which increasingly represent the mainstream left of this

¹¹³ DeMuth, “Why America Needs National Conservatism.”

country—they don't want what we want. What they want is to destroy us" and they have been doing it by "dominating every cultural, intellectual, and political institution the right made a choice to abandon."¹¹⁴ In this way, National Conservatism simultaneously promotes an "own the libs" mentality and heightens fear of liberals' domination of cultural and political institutions. These dueling forces then lead naturally to National Conservatism's central ideological tenet: that nationalism and conservatism are needed to combat the excesses of liberalism.

National Conservatism begins to veer away from Trumpism in more of the particulars of policy and ultimate goals. While Trumpism is not necessarily an intellectual or even necessarily logically consistent movement, National Conservatism tries to sharpen these failures and create a politically cohesive worldview. For example, National Conservatism is aligned with Trumpism significantly on rhetoric surrounding cultural issues such as abortion,¹¹⁵ even if Trump himself was often perceived as only being socially conservative for his own electoral self-interest.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, Trump actively argued for pro-worker policies in his rhetoric, but his policies such as the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 largely benefited corporations and little research has yet shown that the promised "trickle down" effects of the law are helping workers.¹¹⁷ National Conservatism seems to more genuinely argue that workers should be given more power—although not necessarily for their own sake, but because of corporate America's wokeism.

¹¹⁴ Rachel Bovard, "National Conservative Priorities" (National Conservatism Conference II, Orlando, FL, November 15, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKdfxQPEN9Y>.

¹¹⁵ David Smith, "Extreme Abortion Laws Shine Light on Trump's Courting of Religious Right," *The Guardian*, May 13, 2019, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/may/13/donald-trump-evangelical-christians-republicans-abortion-supreme-court>.

¹¹⁶ Robb Ryerse, "I Questioned the Sincerity of Donald Trump's Pro-Life Stance. The Response From My Fellow Evangelicals Was Troubling," *Time*, February 12, 2020, <https://time.com/5783257/donald-trump-pro-life-evangelical-voters/>.

¹¹⁷ William G. Gale and Claire Haldeman, "Searching for Supply-Side Effects of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act," *Brookings Institution*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/searching-for-supply-side-effects-of-the-tax-cuts-and-jobs-act/>.

The clearest difference between National Conservatism and Trumpism, though, is the shockingly absent nature of Trump himself in the movement. National Conservatism broadly tries to avoid the anti-intellectual nature of Trumpism, because it defines itself as an intellectual movement. The series of books and writings produced by Hazony, the formal website and nonprofit status of its parent organization, the series of videos, podcasts, formal conferences, and other materials all attempt to showcase a professional and smart political movement that knows exactly what it wants. This stands in stark contrast to Trump, known explicitly for his anti-intellectualism.¹¹⁸

This separation from Trump takes its most apparent form in the movement's acknowledgement that conservatism must move past Trump, and in the actual physical lack of Trump's presence, either in word, reference, or even vague off-hand remark, in most of the organization's materials and content. In their most generous references, National Conservatives thank Trump for opening space for a renewed discussion about what Republican politics should look like moving forward.¹¹⁹ In their less benevolent moments, National Conservatism simply ignores Trump.¹²⁰ The website never references Trump and he is nearly absent from all materials, besides passing mentions at the conferences—but even there, he is not the center of attention.¹²¹ For National Conservatives, Trump is an obstacle to move beyond. While he may have opened space for more unorthodox political theories and orientations on the right, National Conservatives believe political success in the future will have to extend beyond Trump's base of

¹¹⁸ Max Boot, "How the 'Stupid Party' Created Donald Trump," *The New York Times*, July 31, 2016, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/01/opinion/how-the-stupid-party-created-donald-trump.html>.

¹¹⁹ Various, "Against the Dead Consensus."

¹²⁰ Zack Beauchamp, "Trump and the Dead End of Conservative Nationalism," *Vox*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/7/17/20696543/national-conservatism-conference-2019-trump>.

¹²¹ Jennifer Schuessler, "Polishing the Nationalist Brand in the Trump Era," *The New York Times*, July 19, 2019, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/19/arts/trump-nationalism-tucker-carlson.html>; Beauchamp, "Trump and the Dead End of Conservative Nationalism."

support and capture a broader audience that might be amenable to Trump’s policies, but without his temper.

Where National Conservatism Fits in the Fractious GOP

Outside of Trump, the Republican Party appears somewhat directionless. This is not to say they have no path forward, but the path is muddled and riven by various groups that are all vying for power in the ashes of the Trump presidency. Many polling firms and outlets have attempted to collect data to analyze these various groups and assess how much of the Republican base they make up. One of the most significant of these typology publications comes from Pew Research. In *Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology*, but data from Trump’s former pollster Tony Fabrizio contributes to rounding out the picture.

In Pew’s research, the “Stressed Sideliners” make up 15% of *both* the Democrat and Republican Party and are generally the people least engaged with politics. This is because these are often the most financially worst-off group. These are the least politically polarized individuals and vote at much lower rates than traditional Republicans or Democrats, with only 43% of people from this group voting in 2020. They also tend to hold more liberal views on economics and more moderate conservative cultural views. Second, members of the “Ambivalent Right” make up 18% of Republican or leaning-Republican voters. People in this group are generally conservative on economic issues and oppose large government involvement but are often more socially liberal or moderate on issues such as race, gender, immigration, and abortion. This group also is generally younger and less politically engaged, with a majority saying that they do not feel at home in the Republican Party and are not represented by President Trump. Third, the “Populist Right” makes up 23% of Republican or Republican-leaning voters.

This group is generally quite conservative but is more economically liberal. They often believe that immigration should be sharply restricted, and that the government should play a role to make the economic playing field fairer. More specifically, this group complains about corporations holding too much power and they argue for higher taxes on large corporations and wealthy individuals. Fourth, “Committed Conservatives” only make up 15% of the Republican or Republican-leaning voters but are much more die-hard conservatives than many other groups. These voters are very economically conservative and promote small government, while retaining a more liberal foreign policy. For example, they support maintaining key allies in international relations and are more moderate on issues such as immigration. Finally, “Faith and Flag Conservatives” comprise 23% of Republican and Republican-leaning voters. These are some of the most politically engaged and conservative voters and tend to be white and religious. This is generally where Trump draws his most fervent support as most of them say Trump was the real winner of the 2020 election.¹²²

In general, National Conservatism finds itself without a clear home in the existing groups. Given its focus on traditional conservative values, opposition to wokeness, and general support for Trump’s ideological policies, the movement occupies one of, if not the most, rightward faction in this typology. National Conservatives are likely some blend of the “Populist Right” and “Faith and Flag Conservatives” in Pew’s typology. They hold many economically liberal positions toward workers and advocate holding corporations accountable, while also wanting to restrict immigration. At the same time, National Conservatives are extremely politically engaged, conservative, and religious. Combined, this means National Conservatism may draw support from 46% of Republican or Republican-leaning respondents in this poll.

¹²² Pew Research Center, “Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology,” Pew Research Center, November 9, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/11/09/the-republican-coalition/>.

According to Fabrizio, Lee and Associates, Trump’s pollster Tony Fabrizio’s political consulting firm, in their March 2021 report they similarly identify five major, but slightly different, factions within the Republican Party. This polling is more oriented around Republicans’ favorability toward Trump, but as a statistical tool it still provides useful information about sizes and types of groups. The least favorable group to Trump is the “Never Trump” faction which makes up 15% of the Republican Party and is generally opposed to anything regarding the former president. Next, the “Post-Trump GOP” group is 20% of Republicans and strongly supports Trump, but also believes the party is ready for a new leader. The “Trump Boosters” comprise 28% of the party and have a positive perception of Trump, but generally consider themselves more supporters of the party rather than Trump himself. “Diehard Trumpers” are 27% of the party and are full-on Trump supporters who think Trump should continue to lead the party, with some even being drawn to the GOP because of Trump. Finally, the “Infowars GOP” is 10% of the party and entirely supports Trump and is also enraptured by conspiracy theories such as QAnon.¹²³

Analyzing National Conservatism’s ties to Trumpism is less useful because the movement largely avoids discussing or trying to emulate his personality, but within Fabrizio, Lee and Associates’ grouping, the movement falls somewhere between the “Post-Trump GOP” and “Trump Boosters.” Although not formally opposed to Trump—and in fact often appreciative of the policy window he has opened to discuss a new path forward for conservatism—National Conservatism only tepidly supports Trump. Surely, not many in the movement would classify themselves as “Diehard Trumpers” or conspiracy theorists. At the same time, the all-out threat of

¹²³ Fabrizio, Lee and Associates, “Political ‘Tribes’ within Today’s GOP: National Survey of GOP Voters,” March 2021.

wokeism can often create avenues for conspiracism to run rampant, and National Conservatism is not totally devoid of this tendency.

A Deeper Dive Into the Issues

National Conservatism is hard to place within existing typologies and seems to only attract support from more extreme conservative groups as it tends to blend both the populist and socially conservative elements of the GOP. Thinking more tangibly about these groupings, raises the question of whether there is hypothetically support for National Conservatism among the American public. Based on existing polling, in the end National Conservatism does not draw a lot of support on many of its key issues.

Pew's political typology of the Republican Party suggests that Republicans from each of the four major groups, not considering "Stressed Sideliners" who split for Democrats and Republicans, align on many relevant issues. For example, over 66% of each of these groups says that the "government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals." Over half of each of these four groups also say "it's not the government's job to protect people from themselves."¹²⁴ These findings contrast sharply with National Conservatism's vision of government involvement in a few ways.

First, National Conservatism extensively focuses on the role of government in constraining corporations. Individuals such as J.D. Vance, for example, have extensively spoken about the need to use the state to combat corporations that advance wokeism. During the first GOP Senate debate for the 2022 Senate race in Ohio, Vance lambasted Big Tech companies. "These companies are way too powerful and we have to break them up. We have to create more competition in this marketplace or we are not going to have the ability to speak our mind as

¹²⁴ Pew Research Center, "Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology."

conservatives. We have to go to war against these companies or they are going to destroy our country,” Vance argued.¹²⁵

National Conservatives also remain outliers here in terms of government involvement on some specific issues. For example, only 17% of the “Populist Right” group in Pew’s research agreed that “most corporations make a fair and reasonable amount of profit” compared to 70%, 76%, and 80% for the other conservative groups.¹²⁶ This is a reasonable interpretation of the National Conservative position as they argue that corporations should be organized around a more common-good conception of capitalism. Similarly, 56% of the “populist right” camp argues that “tax rates on household income over \$400,000 should be raised”—a conventional National Conservative position—but only 24%, 34%, and 42% of the other groups support this position.¹²⁷ Remember that the “Populist Right” only makes up 23% of Republican or Republican-leaning individuals. These policy issues surrounding corporations, workers, and the economy are central to National Conservatism’s platform, but generally do not find much support in a Republican Party which is much more economically libertarian.

The second way in which National Conservatives do not align with the Republican Party’s anti-government stance is because of cultural politics. In National Conservatives’ theory of the case, the government’s value-neutral approach to public life under liberalism has led to a weakened community and general moral decay on many fronts. Although Republicans largely oppose abortion and other similar cultural issues such as transgender rights,¹²⁸ it is unclear whether they would support the state intervening in many situations. As research has shown,

¹²⁵ Haley BeMiller, “Ohio’s Top GOP Senate Candidates Met on Stage for the First Time. Here Are Three Takeaways,” *The Columbus Dispatch*, October 24, 2021, <https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/politics/elections/2021/10/24/ohio-senate-race-gop-candidates-meet-forum-hugh-hewitt/8526756002/>.

¹²⁶ Pew Research Center, “Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology.”

¹²⁷ Pew Research Center.

¹²⁸ Pew Research Center; Megan Brenan, “Changing One’s Gender Is Sharply Contentious Moral Issue,” *Gallup*, June 11, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/351020/changing-one-gender-sharply-contentious-moral-issue.aspx>.

Americans tend to be more libertarian on many social issues—even sometimes those they disagree with—so state-enforced regulation on many social issues likely loses more moderate Republican support.¹²⁹

This is reinforced in public opinion surrounding the role of the state, especially in the example of religion. According to Pew, 75% of “Faith and Flag Conservatives” believe that “government policies should support religious values and beliefs,” but only 26% of the “Ambivalent Right,” 28% of “Committed Conservatives,” and 29% of the “Populist Right” support this idea. Reintroducing religion into the public square is one of National Conservatism’s central tenets, so the lack of support among Republicans should be worrying. Despite this polling, National Conservative remains centrally focused on using the state to combat the excesses of a liberal culture. In his speech at NatCon II in Orlando, Rod Dreher argued this quite bluntly: “We need to quit being satisfied with owning the libs, and save our country. We need to unapologetically embrace the use of state power.”¹³⁰ Using the government to protect people from atheism, gender transitions, or even their boss is a fight worth having for National Conservatives and sets them apart from most Republicans.

At the same time, National Conservatives tend to align with Pew’s conservative groupings on other issues related to culture, such as race and gender. Between 63% to 87% of Republicans in these groups say that “the obstacles that once made it harder for women than men to get ahead are now largely gone” and between 67% to 94% say that “white people do not

¹²⁹ Nate Silver, “There Are Few Libertarians. But Many Americans Have Libertarian Views.,” *FiveThirtyEight*, April 9, 2015, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/there-are-few-libertarians-but-many-americans-have-libertarian-views/>; Hannah Hartig, “About Six-in-Ten Americans Say Abortion Should Be Legal in All or Most Cases,” *Pew Research Center*, May 6, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/06/about-six-in-ten-americans-say-abortion-should-be-legal-in-all-or-most-cases/>.

¹³⁰ Rod Dreher, “What Conservatives Must Learn from Orban’s Hungary” (National Conservatism Conference II, Orlando, FL, November 10, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BEB7FdogGS4>.

benefit much or at all from advantages in society that Black people do not have.”¹³¹ These views are consistent with National Conservatism’s focus on opposing wokeism, which is often perceived as an excessive focus on group identities such as race or gender, structural interpretations of oppression, language policing, and cancel culture. Derryck Green, a political commentator and Black conservative who spoke at NatCon II explained this thinking clearly. Characterizing the liberal position, he explained “[b]ecause Blacks suffered in the past, it suggests that it’s not only unfair, but it’s unreasonable, to hold Blacks to universal measures of character and the rigor of merit-based achievement... this is the hard bigotry of no expectations.”¹³² For National Conservatives, thinking along racial lines simply perpetuates racism—a popular belief among many conservatives.

More broadly, although National Conservatism outlines economic positions on corporations, workers, and income inequality that seem out-of-step with Republicans, their positions are popular with the public at large. For example, 73% of Americans say that “major corporations in the U.S. have too much power” with majorities in both parties expressing this view, although significantly less Republicans than Democrats do.¹³³ This question remains vague, especially in terms of what policy the public wants to pursue in response, but the general trend is promising for National Conservatism. The public also favors raising taxes, with 58% of Americans saying that “tax rates on household income over \$250,000 should be raised a little or a lot.”¹³⁴

¹³¹ Pew Research Center, “Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology.”

¹³² Derryck Green, “Racial Identity or National Identity” (Speech, National Conservatism Conference II, Orlando, FL, November 15, 2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sp4CICesLjg&ab_channel=NationalConservatism.

¹³³ Pew Research Center, “In a Politically Polarized Era, Sharp Divides in Both Partisan Coalitions,” Pew Research Center, December 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/12/17/in-a-politically-polarized-era-sharp-divides-in-both-partisan-coalitions/>.

¹³⁴ Pew Research Center.

At the same time, Americans have become more socially liberal over time, with 2021 being the first time in 20 years that more Americans identified as liberal than conservative on social issues,¹³⁵ a troubling sign for a movement dedicated to championing social conservatism. Perhaps more favorably, the American public is also becoming increasingly critical of Trumpism’s rhetorical brazenness, signaling to pollsters that they prefer less inflammatory and more respectful discussions and interactions between politicians.¹³⁶ As an intellectual movement focused on shedding Trump’s personality, National Conservatism may find a foothold here, but overall it fails to draw on significant groups of existing Republican voters or the larger public—either based on broader group categorizations or specific issue-polling.

How Republican Politicians Adopt or Integrate National Conservatism

National Conservatism may not have a clear base of support among conservatives or the Republican Party, but it is still a dominant force in the intellectual conservative movement today. That dominance has translated into political momentum in certain pockets of the U.S. The 2022 Ohio Republican Senate Primary is an excellent example of National Conservatism in action. J.D. Vance and Josh Mandel, the former state treasurer, are locked in a tight race with more establishment Republicans such as investment banker Mike Gibbons and state GOP chair Jane Timken. Trump’s endorsement of Vance has shaken up the race somewhat, although it has not stopped most of the candidates from constantly trying to one-up each other and become largely as Trumpist as possible to win the Republican base vote. Among the field, Vance and Mandel

¹³⁵ Lydia Saad, “Americans More Divided on Social Than Economic Issues,” Gallup, June 24, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/351494/americans-divided-social-economic-issues.aspx>.

¹³⁶ Pew Research Center, “Public Highly Critical of State of Political Discourse in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, June 19, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/06/19/public-highly-critical-of-state-of-political-discourse-in-the-u-s/>.

especially stand out as some form of National Conservatives with their persistent focus on nationalism, such as their promotion of a border wall to “solve the Southern border crisis.”¹³⁷

Vance harps on this point on his campaign website and during public appearances, especially in relation to nationalism and immigration. For Vance, increasing immigration is a non-starter *because* the U.S. is losing its national character—a central concern of National Conservatism. As Vance writes:

Importantly, our ability to assimilate immigrants successfully—something our country should be proud of—is contingent on American leadership that loves this country. Forty years ago, new American immigrants came to a country where bipartisan leaders delivered a simple message: this great country is now your own, and you have a duty to help build it. Today, those same leaders deliver a different message: this is an evil and racist country, and you owe nothing to it. Because of this, our capacity to assimilate the next generation of immigrants is limited, and our legal immigration system should account for this fact by changing who we let in and reducing the total numbers.¹³⁸

For Vance, nationalism requires a certain dedication to one’s country, and he links restrictions on immigration to achieving this goal. Further, both candidates promote an anti-interventionist foreign policy that centers American interests.¹³⁹

Both Vance and Mandel also advocate for the state to attack corporations and protect public morality—another cornerstone of National Conservatism. For example, both candidates argue that Congress should make abortion illegal.¹⁴⁰ Vance especially harps on the need for the government to “raise taxes on companies that ship jobs overseas and use their money to fund anti-American radical movements,” a clear turn toward National Conservatism and away from

¹³⁷ “Meet JD Vance - Conservative Outsider Running for Senate,” JD Vance for Senate Inc., accessed April 13, 2022, <https://jdvance.com/issues/>; “Issues,” Josh Mandel for US Senate, accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.joshmandel.com/issues>.

¹³⁸ “Meet JD Vance - Conservative Outsider Running for Senate.”

¹³⁹ “Meet JD Vance - Conservative Outsider Running for Senate”; “Issues.”

¹⁴⁰ “Meet JD Vance - Conservative Outsider Running for Senate”; “Issues.”

traditional Republican orthodoxy. He also attacks Big Tech, arguing that the government should “break up the big tech companies, to reduce their power in our economy and politics.”¹⁴¹

Even further, Mandel advocates for a revival of religion in the public square. According to Mandel, in response to progressive ideology that is trying to secularize America, “[w]e should be doubling down and instilling belief in God in the classroom, in the workplace, and throughout society.”¹⁴² Mandel has previously stated that “we need a Judeo-Christian revolution in this country,”¹⁴³ previously tweeting that “[t]he Bible and the constitution are not supposed to be separate.”¹⁴⁴

Both campaigns draw on the “own the libs” mentality and hysterical opposition to wokeism, citing extreme racial ideology and CRT as primary reasons to support their campaign. Vance begins one of his ads asking straight to the camera: “Are you a racist? Do you hate Mexicans?”¹⁴⁵ In a similar vein, in one ad Mandel declares “Martin Luther King marched right here so skin color wouldn’t matter,” as he poses on the Edmund Pettus Bridge.¹⁴⁶ Mandel has become even more brash in recent months, though, and perhaps gone beyond the National Conservative goal of presentability, verbally insulting a Democratic primary opponent to her face,¹⁴⁷ and nearly instigating a fight with Mike Gibbons during a debate.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴¹ “Meet JD Vance - Conservative Outsider Running for Senate.”

¹⁴² Emily Brooks, “Josh Mandel Bets Push for Judeo-Christian Revolution Will Win Him Ohio Senate Seat,” Yahoo, July 25, 2021, <https://news.yahoo.com/josh-mandel-bets-push-judeo-103000893.html>.

¹⁴³ Brooks.

¹⁴⁴ Josh Mandel [@JoshMandelOhio], “The Bible and the Constitution Are Not Supposed to Be Separate.,” Tweet, *Twitter*, July 2, 2021, <https://twitter.com/JoshMandelOhio/status/1411023629186482180>.

¹⁴⁵ JD Vance for Senate, *Are You A Racist?*, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3qYJoSV0II>.

¹⁴⁶ Josh Mandel For Senate, *Equality*, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbNfBTbpWaE>.

¹⁴⁷ Elizabeth Elkind, “Chaos at Ohio Senate Debate as Republican Josh Mandel Shouts at Voter,” Daily Mail, February 22, 2022,

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10539981/Chaos-Ohio-Senate-debate-Republican-Josh-Mandel-shouts-voter-saying-out.html>.

¹⁴⁸ Julie Carr Smyth, “Ohio Republican Senate Debate Nearly Devolves Into Physical Confrontation,” Time, March 21, 2022, <https://time.com/6159303/ohio-gop-senate-debate/>.

Another way in which National Conservatism has come to the fore is in Republicans' current attacks against elementary school curriculums. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, for example, recently signed the Parental Rights in Education bill which gives parents the right to sue school districts if “[c]lassroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity” occurs “in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards.”¹⁴⁹ This move toward the state playing a more active role in education signals the pull of National Conservatism within the GOP. Even further, this bill put DeSantis on a collision course with the Walt Disney Corporation, the type of corporation Republicans in prior decades would have hailed as a national hero.¹⁵⁰

National Conservative is also appearing in the mouths of some unexpected players. Consider Senator Ted Cruz who spoke at NatCon II as the top-billed guest. First elected to the Senate to represent Texas in 2012 as part of the Tea Party wave, Cruz has since become an active player in Republican presidential politics, and now the National Conservatism movement. What becomes clear quickly, however, is the lack of belief in the movement. In his speech at NatCon II, Cruz warns against “right wing big government.” He continues: “There are some who are thinking through what to do, who are suggesting the answer is more government power over every aspect of our life, but in a more conservative direction than in a more liberal direction. Let me tell you right now: tyranny never works out for those being governed.”¹⁵¹

For a National Conservative conference, Cruz sounded quite similar to a traditional Republican on many of his stances. This reflects a growing tension in the National Conservatism

¹⁴⁹ Jaclyn Diaz, “Florida’s Governor Signs Controversial Law Opponents Dubbed ‘Don’t Say Gay,’” *NPR*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/28/1089221657/dont-say-gay-florida-desantis>.

¹⁵⁰ Lori Rozsa, “DeSantis Takes on Disney in a Culture War with National Implications,” *Washington Post*, April 13, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/04/13/desantis-disney-dont-say-gay-bill/>.

¹⁵¹ Ted Cruz, “American Revival” (National Conservatism Conference II, Orlando, FL, November 9, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QurOfjTzQIc>.

movement as it has begun to grow. Today, the most recent conferences host a wide variety of speakers who do not naturally fit under the National Conservative umbrella, including Cruz, but also other senators such as Josh Hawley and Marco Rubio, not to mention academics such as Brown University professor Glenn Loury.¹⁵² At the same time, speakers such as Cruz clearly hope to fit in with the crowd, even if they cannot hide some of their core positions. Take for example how Cruz entirely avoided discussing deficit spending, a routine conservative position that would likely curry no favor at NatCon II. As National Review contributor Ethan Lamb notes, “This change of priorities suggests that Cruz cares far more about titillating political insiders, a group he likely views as kingmakers in the future of the conservative movement, than about advancing an intellectually consistent, substantive agenda.”¹⁵³

This is a fundamental question National Conservatism needs to answer in the political space: as the movement grows, can it sustain and protect itself from outsiders looking to use it and shape it for their own political gain? As Lamb writes, “politicians in the past who attach themselves to anti-establishment campaigns often outlast their ostensible ideological underpinnings in an effort to retain power.”¹⁵⁴ The state of the movement in 2022 creates little confidence in its ability to withstand this outside invasion. National Conservatism instead appears to be on a collision course to eventually blend with the GOP until it is unrecognizable, rather than withstand the opportunists and assert itself as an ideologically pure and coherent movement.

¹⁵² National Conservatism, “NatCon II: A Conference in Orlando, FL,” National Conservatism Conference, 2021, October 31, 2021, <https://nationalconservatism.org/natcon-2-2021/>.

¹⁵³ Ethan Lamb, “The Self-Servitude That Plagues National Conservatism,” *National Review*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2022/03/the-self-servitude-that-plagues-national-conservatism/>.

¹⁵⁴ Lamb, “The Self-Servitude That Plagues National Conservatism.”

Conclusion: An Illiberal Future?

When Trump lost the 2020 presidential election, the opportunities for the future of the GOP seemed to widen immensely. Trump had long maintained a contentious relationship with many elements of the Republican Party, not to mention the wider political and cultural world. Figuring out how to take the most successful elements of Trumpism, then, while shaping a political movement that could gain popular support is a challenge that many groups have tried to take on. National Conservatism, however, occupies a special lane because of its official organizational structure and level of visibility.

Founded by a passionate Zionist, Israel's lack of national identity and cohesion during his youth convinced Yoram Hazony of its necessity, and he imported those views into the American context. In *The Virtue of Nationalism*, Hazony lays the groundwork for what would become National Conservatism. For Hazony, it includes both nationalism, the ideal state formation that promotes the greatest freedom, peace, and institutions, and conservatism, an illiberal state-led national effort to promote traditional conservative values. In the end, both elements of the movement work together: nationalism helps build a cohesive whole, while conservatism defines the values that community holds.

The tensions within the movement, however, present significant challenges. The extent to which National Conservatism relies on a hyperbolic caricature of its opponents is problematic. Further, the international nature of the movement assumes that all nations everywhere must fit some clear mold wherein traditional social conservative values *are* their nationalist values, but America's liberalism—particularly its dedication to multiculturalism and immigration—present a direct challenge to this proposition. The movement's abstract nature, also, allows it to avoid discussing the ugly side of nationalism directly, particularly the way in which religious or ethnic

minorities might be subjugated or mistreated. Key thinkers such as Hazony and Deneen, as well as the broader movement, also never take up the specifics of America's founding—another reason why America's inherent liberal traditions might pose a distinct challenge for National Conservatives here. In the end, the revolutionary nature of National Conservatism seems contradictory to conservatism itself, and the potential alternative of civic nationalism presents an appealing opportunity for nationalism rooted in a more place-specific identity and not focused on religious, ethnic, or similar ties.

In the broader context of the Republican Party, National Conservatism remains somewhat disoriented. The movement aligns strongly with Trump in its mentality and many policy goals, yet simultaneously brands itself as an intellectual movement—in the process attempting to separate itself from Trump's personality. Within the GOP, National Conservatism is hard to fit into the major categories that pollsters have currently identified, as it is some combination of both the more economically moderate populist camp and the more religiously conservative far-right camp. On specific political issues, the movement also fails to find popular support. This is generally because America is a uniquely libertarian country that dislikes state intervention, but also because National Conservatism simply lands on the wrong side of public opinion on many issues, such as the role of religion in the public square.

Overall, National Conservatism is a new, vibrant, yet likely doomed movement within the U.S. Vance and Mandel's campaigns both demonstrate its potential as a political strategy, but on a very limited scale and with modifications. Perhaps government action against corporations provides a more compelling avenue to gain public support, but only time will tell whether DeSantis's bid against The Walt Disney Company, for example, will bear fruit. In the end, the odds that National Conservatism will simply merge itself with the Republican establishment and

nudge it in a slightly more nationalist and illiberal direction seems increasingly likely. Politicians such as Ted Cruz are leading this transition, and the movement may eventually lose its intellectual cohesiveness and become indistinguishable from other groups within the GOP, or dissolve entirely.

Looking forward, however, the future for the Republican Party in the short to medium-term appears promising; electoral successes in 2022 and beyond appear likely no matter what policy positions and ideological goals the party aligns itself behind. This reality signals the dangerous state of American politics. Rather than a country where policies, politicians, and ideology matter, structural electoral advantages for Republicans and a culture wars-focused political discourse have created an environment devoid of the deliberation necessary for democratic governance. America may avoid the perils of National Conservatism for now, but these advantages for Republicans ensure there remains the potential for future more broadly popular, ideologically consistent, and appealing illiberal and authoritarian-minded movements to take hold as the Republican Party continues to figure out its future. Being prepared for this frightening future still requires taking National Conservatism and other forms of illiberal ideology seriously, especially the discontent they draw upon, and creating an alternative that can attend to those anxieties.

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