

[Opinion](#)
[NCR Voices](#)



(Dreamstime/Evitte83)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

August 9, 2023

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Lee Drutman, of the left-leaning [New America Foundation](#), continues to be the most interesting and genuinely provocative political scientist in the country. His latest "[Undercurrent Events](#)" Substack posting argues that American politics looks "calcified, stuck and hyper-polarized" on the surface, but "latent factions and repressed diversity" lurk underneath the surface.

His analysis of why the MAGA base of the Republican Party has a lock on that party's nomination is illuminating, and not just for explaining why Trump's renomination seems secure.

"Core MAGA is a political minority in this country. Probably around 17 percent of the electorate," Drutman writes. "Yet, because of the ways in which the US party system operates, 17 percent can win majority control. The basic formula is simple: Just be a plurality inside of one of the two major parties."

The New York Times' David Leonhardt [looked at the divisions within the GOP](#) from a different angle on Monday, namely, the rejection of certain tenets of neoliberal economic policies by populist conservatives like Sens. Josh Hawley, Marco Rubio and J.D. Vance. Florida governor and presidential candidate Ron DeSantis ranged himself with the populists in a [major speech last week](#). "We are a nation with an economy, not the other way around," DeSantis said, a sentiment that could have been voiced by Sens. Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren as well.

Don't be fooled. DeSantis and the populists on the right may have stumbled across the problems with neoliberalism, but they are not to be trusted. Of course, the myth of the free market eliminating the need for value judgments in economic matters was just that, a myth, but you need to make sure you apply the correct values.

Advertisement

The fact that Hawley, Rubio, Vance and, now, DeSantis talk about the economic effects of immigration without bothering to acknowledge the humanity of migrants tells you all you need to know about their problematic value system.

Back to Drutman. He looks at the June iteration of the Echelon Insights' "[Quadrants Report](#)." I [first wrote](#) about these reports and Drutman's analysis of them in 2019. Then, as now, they break down the liberal-versus-conservative binary into four quadrants, distinguishing between people's ideological identification on social versus economic issues.

Sixty-one percent of American voters are left-of-center on economic issues, according to this year's report, and 51% are right-of-center on social issues. Forty-three percent of voters are liberal on both social and economic issues, while only 34% are conservative on both.

Those who are liberal on social issues but conservative fiscally constitute 5% of the electorate (the report labels them "libertarians"). Those who are more conservative on social issues but liberal on economic ones make up 18% of the electorate and the report labels them "populists." Winning a majority of the populists is the key to creating a governing majority.

The Republicans who are flirting with different approaches to economic issues are trying to appeal to this populist cohort, without alienating the pro-business, neoliberal wing of the party, which is especially powerful when it comes to fundraising.

The Democrats are less willing to stake out centrist ground on social issues because of the fundraising strength of upper-middle-class liberal voters for whom those issues are most important.

The Echelon Report then does something really interesting. It articulates a set of policy positions for five electoral groupings, without naming them, and asks voters which grouping most appeals to them.

So, for example, the "populist party," to which they affix a photo of Trump, is the label they give to the 26% of voters who identified with this policy set: "Stop illegal

immigration, put America First, stand up to political correctness, and end unfair trade deals."

Eighteen percent of voters aligned with this issue set: "Defend the American system of free enterprise, promote traditional family values, and ensure a strong military." Echelon labels this group "conservative" and placed Mike Pence's photo next to it.

The "Acela Party," named for the faster, more expensive Amtrak service along the Northeast Corridor, was chosen by 11% of the electorate and its policy stances are "Advance social progress including women's rights and LGBTQ rights, work with other countries through free trade and diplomacy, cut the deficit, and reform capitalism with sensible regulation." The authors of the report placed Michael Bloomberg's face next to the Acela title.

Joe Biden's face is put next to the "Labor Party" and the issue set is: "Put the middle class first, pass universal health insurance, strengthen labor unions and raise taxes on the wealthy to support programs for the less well off." This year, 31% of voters chose this option, up from 28% last October.

Finally, gaining the support of 9% is what the Echelon authors call the "Green Party." The platform voters selected was "Pass a Green New Deal to build a carbon-neutral economy with jobs for all, break up big corporations, end systemic inequality, and promote social and economic justice." They put Rep. Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez' photo next to this option. Interestingly, this cohort has grown by two points since last October. Only the conservative/Mike Pence cohort lost support, also 2%.

In this configuration, Drutman rightly notes that "the Acela Party holds the balance of power" and that "the logical governing coalition would be the Labor-Green-Acela coalition – a center-left coalition."

He concludes, "For me, the big takeaway is that the surface level hyper-partisanship of our politics is holding back more possible diversity and coalition-building beneath the surface."

Drutman goes on to explain how he thinks the adoption of "[fusion voting](#)" would allow some of that diversity and coalition-building to rise to the surface, and we will look at that another day.

For today, it is enough to note that both parties face a tug of war within themselves, and that the path to electoral victory requires each party to reach out to a center of

the electorate that does not fall into a neat, partisan binary. Wouldn't it be great if we found ways to empower those voters in the center — letting them bring our political discourse with them — rather than forcing them into what Drutman rightly calls "the two-party doom loop"?