

OUTLOOK

The three-cornered fight to save the GOP



Charles Krauthammer says the race to win the Republican presidential nomination is between traditional conservatism and ethnic nationalism.

WASHINGTON — It's hard to believe that the United States, having resisted the siren song of socialism during its entire 20th-century heyday (the only major democracy to do so), should suddenly succumb to its charms a generation after its intellectual demise. Indeed, the prospect of socialist Bernie Sanders, whatever his current momentum, winning the Democratic nomination remains far-fetched.

The Democrats would be risking a November electoral disaster of historic dimensions. Yet there is no denying how far Sanders has pulled his party to the left — and how hard Hillary Clinton, has been racing to catch up.

The Republicans, on the other hand, are dealing with a full-scale riot. The temptation they face is trading in a century of conservatism for Trumpism.

The 2016 presidential race has turned into an epic contest between the ethnonationalist populism of Donald Trump and traditional conservatism, though in two varieties: the scorched-earth fundamentalist version of Ted Cruz, and a reformist version represented by Marco Rubio (and several so-called establishment candidates) — and articulated most fully by noncandidate Paul Ryan and a cluster of highly productive thinkers and policy wonks dubbed “reformicons.”

Trump insists that he's a conservative, but in his pronouncements and policies, conservatism seems more of a rental — a three-story penthouse rental with Central Park-view, to be sure — than an ideological home. Trump protests that Ronald Reagan, too, migrated from left to right. True, but Reagan's transformation occurred in his 40s — not in his 60s.

In radically different ways, Trump and Sanders are addressing the deep anxiety stemming from the stagnation in wages and living standards that has squeezed the middle and working classes for a generation. Sanders locates the villainy in a billionaire class that has rigged the economic and political system. Trump blames foreigners, most prominently those cunning Mexicans, Chinese, Japanese and Saudis who've been taking merciless advantage of us, in concert with America's own leaders who are, alternatively, stupid and incompetent or bought and corrupt.

Hence Trump's most famous policy recommendations: anti-immigrant, including the forced deportation of 11 million people; anti-trade, with a 45 percent tariff on Chinese goods and a 35 percent tariff on U.S. manufacturing moved to Mexico; and anti-Muslim, most notori-

ously a temporary complete ban on entry into the U.S., we are assured, except that the ban applies “until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on.”

Trump has limited concern for the central tenet of American conservatism (and most especially of the tea party movement) — limited government. The most telling example is his wholehearted support for “eminent domain,” i.e. the forcible appropriation by government of private property. Trump called it “wonderful.”

Trump has not yet called Vladimir Putin wonderful but he has taken a shine to the swaggering mini-czar who seems to run his trains on time. When informed that Putin kills opponents and journalists, Trump's initial reaction was, “Well, I think that our country does plenty of killing, also,” the kind of moronic moral equivalence that conservatives have railed against for decades. Although, to be fair, after some prompting, Trump did come out against the killing of journalists.

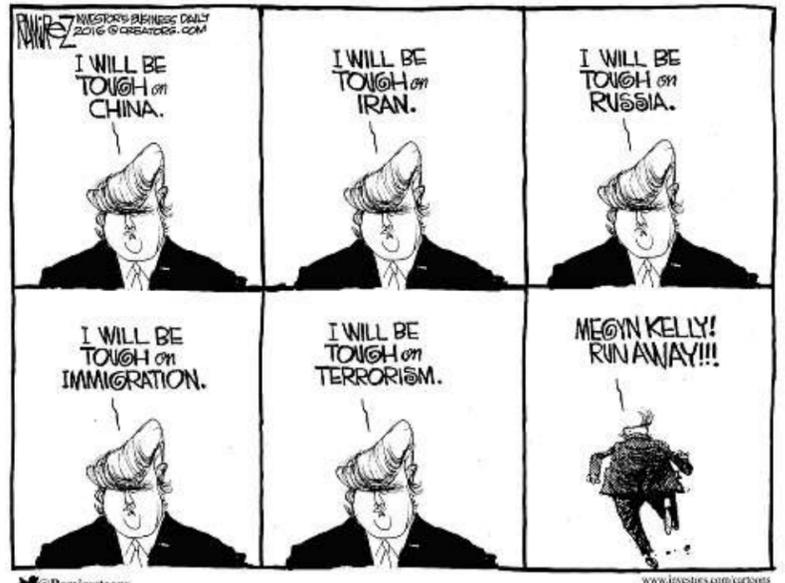
Cruz is often lumped with Trump in the “anti-establishment” camp. That suited Cruz tactically for a while, but it's fairly meaningless, given that “establishment” can mean anything these days. And given the huge gulf between the political philosophies of the two men. Cruz is a genuine conservative — austere, indeed radical, so much so that he considers mainstream congressional conservatives apostates. And finds Trump not conservative at all, as he is now furiously, belatedly insisting.

My personal preference is for the third ideological alternative, the reform conservatism that locates the source of our problems not in heartless billionaires or crafty foreigners, but in our superannuated, increasingly sclerotic 20th-century welfare-state structures. Their desperate need for reform has been overshadowed by the new populism, but Speaker Paul Ryan is determined to introduce a serious reform agenda in this year's Congress — boring stuff like welfare reform, health care reform, tax reform and institutional congressional reforms.

Paired with a president like Rubio (or Chris Christie or Carly Fiorina), such an agenda would give conservatism its best opportunity since Reagan to become the country's governing philosophy.

Unless the GOP takes the populist leap. In which case, a conservative restoration will be a long time coming.

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Informed voters can have effect on primary

Doing homework should result in electing leaders who better reflect public

By Mark P. Jones

In the fall, more Metro Houston voters than ever will be paying attention to electoral politics. But by then, the fate of many races will be sealed — the decision made by a small minority of area residents who took the time to participate in the Democratic and Republican primaries in March.

The civic tragedy doesn't only touch presidential races, which will always draw the biggest media interest and the greatest number of voters. Lamentably, important down-ballot contests are decided by even fewer voters. And the consequences pile up fast. If you don't participate in the party primaries, you effectively forfeit your ability to determine who represents you in Washington, D.C., and Austin.

Online voter registration, as proposed in the state Legislature last year, would be a big help. But after a push against the initiative led by Harris County Tax Assessor/Collector Mike Sullivan, that's not coming to a computer near you any time soon. Voter registration cards are available at most U.S. post offices and county offices. The registration form must be sent in by Feb. 1.

Now you're ready to participate. And, yes, it's going to require some work on the part of voters to learn candidates' qualifications and stands on public policy issues. Do they support transparency in government? What will they do to ensure the office or agency they will oversee runs efficiently? Unlike the electoral process in the fall, candidates' different partisan affiliations will be of no help. Voters will be casting ballots either in the Republican or Democratic primary. There is no straight ticket.

The Houston area is represented by 11 U.S. House members, 10 state senators and 37 state representatives. In only a couple of these 58 races is there really much doubt today about which party's candidate will be victorious in November. Similarly, Texans will be voting in eight statewide contests in which the Republican candidate is the overwhelming favorite; no Democrat has won statewide since 1994.

While the number of competitive area races in November (outside of county-wide contests in Harris County) will be minimal, there are a host of competitive Democratic and Republican primaries on Houston-area ballots this March, from the Republican presidential primary to several U.S. House races to a dozen state House contests. The outcomes will play an important role in determining if the balance of power in the U.S. Congress and the Texas Legislature will move to the left or right, if the influence of the Houston area in D.C. and Austin will rise or fall and if the area's legislators will more or less

accurately mirror the ethnic/racial composition of their districts.

In a vast majority of Texas federal and state elections, the candidate who wins in November is the one whose personal traits and policy positions are most closely in line with those of the majority who participate in the candidate's party primary. In simplest terms, if you play, you win.

For example, the 2014 Republican state attorney general primary featured two centrist conservatives, Dan Branch and Barry Smitherman, and one tea party movement conservative, Ken Paxton. Of the state's 19 million voting age adults and 14 million registered voters, only 1.3 million cast a ballot in this primary, with Paxton winning 569,034 votes. In the May runoff, Paxton handily defeated Branch, 466,407 to 269,098.

Later that fall, and in 2015 when Paxton was indicted on three charges of felony securities fraud, it was common to hear Democrats and establishment Republicans lament that Paxton had been elected as attorney general. But those same groups did not turn out in large numbers to support Paxton's rivals in the GOP primary, whereas the state's tea party movement conservatives mobilized to back the contest's one proven constitutional conservative. And, as the victor in the Republican primary, Paxton was a virtual lock to be the state's next attorney general. In the end, the attorney general of 28 million Texans was effectively chosen by around a half million Texans, or 2 percent of the state's residents.

In a general election, even if a voter has never heard of any of the candidates in a race, they at least have the valuable informational cue provided by the candidates' party labels. In a primary, everyone has the same party label, and, if voters enter the voting booth uninformed, they run the risk of nominating a suboptimal candidate via random voting or voting based purely on some vague real or imagined familiarity with a candidate's name. A case in point was the 2012 Democratic Harris County District Attorney primary involving two candidates, the high-quality and credible Zack Fertitta and gadfly Lloyd Oliver. Oliver won, and in doing so made it difficult for many Harris County Democrats to recommend that voters cast a straight Democratic ticket in 2012.

Early voting starts Feb. 16 and goes through Feb. 26, with Election Day March 1. Any registered voter can participate in the primary of either party. Make sure that this year you are one of those Texans who is having an impact by participating in the primary as an informed voter, not one of those Texans who is sitting on the sidelines and letting others determine who speaks for them in Washington, D.C., and Austin.

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Rampant human trafficking hidden in plain sight

Crime isn't just a problem for developing world; many are enslaved in the U.S., as bust of area brothel showed

By Molly Gochman

When we hear about human trafficking, many of us think about a problem that exists in the developing world — something that happens primarily outside of U.S. borders.

But while countries such as Syria, Qatar, Sudan and the Central African Republic are the worst transgressors when it comes to slave labor, each year thousands of people are trafficked illegally in the United States — and right in our neighborhoods.

That became even more clear last week, when the madam of the Las Palmas II cantina, a notorious Houston brothel, was sentenced to life in prison for her role in forcing young women and girls into prostitution through an international sex trafficking ring.

The rampant crime of human trafficking is hidden in plain sight. If we don't take

action against it, we are complicit.

An estimated 36 million people around the world are trapped by debt bondage, forced labor, indentured servitude, commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking, according to data from Australian-based human rights group Walk Free Foundation. They are forced to work in farm fields, factories, mines, construction sites, restaurants, hotels, retail stores, brothels and private homes. The threat of violence shackles these vulnerable people anywhere slave owners can get away with it.

More than half of these victims are women and girls. A quarter of them are children.

We knowingly and unknowingly support many slavery-tainted businesses. We also use tens of thousands of human slaves right here in our yards, in our fields,

in our factories and in the dark underbelly of the sex trade. Human slavery drives a \$150 billion industry that creates many of our everyday products.

Recently, the Texas attorney general announced that the state will start a new law enforcement unit focused on human trafficking and transnational organized crime.

The state's focus on the problem and a crackdown from law enforcement is commendable. It will reinforce the efforts by Houston's special advisor to the mayor on human trafficking and by the dozens of committed activists and organizations like Children at Risk, YMCA International and United Against Human Trafficking — to name a few.

But the victims of human trafficking are hard to see, because they come from a segment of our society that is most often invisible — the homeless, foster-care youth and runaways. They are the poorest and most vulnerable among us.

It's time that we all start paying more

attention to the crime, the causes, the solutions and the people who are affected.

If more of us take note and spread the word, more people will take action. Together, we'll make more informed purchases. We'll recognize the signs and report trafficking to the National Human Trafficking Hotline at (888) 373-7888. We'll rally to change our laws and preclude the growth of this truly heinous human rights violation.

Eventually, as compassion and awareness spread, fewer people will suffer everywhere.

It is time we shed light on those who have fallen through the metaphorical cracks in our everyday line of sight.

Gochman is an artist and activist who grew up in Houston. In 2014, she created Red Sand Project, an international participatory artwork that invites the public to pour red sand into sidewalk cracks and share photos of their work on social media with the hashtag #RedSandProject.