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*Article*

# The Pathologies of Trumpism: A Study in Authoritarian Ideological Sources

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**Abstract:** Trumpism is not merely a populist deviation but a postmodern ideological cocktail composed of syncretic, contradictory, and volatile fragments. This analysis aims to deconstruct this mixture by highlighting its roots, internal dynamics, and political consequences. As a post-democratic model, Trumpism shapes a *sui generis* form of authoritarianism in which ideologies are recycled, fragmented, and recombined to serve personalized power. Trumpism should be understood as a syncretic ideology that combines elements such as the alt-right, accelerationism, techno-fascism, and sectarian neo-Protestantism. In this article, however, I will examine two ideologues who have served as officials within the

Trump administration and who advocate for a radical transformation of the constitutional architecture of the United States. We analyse this distortion through the lens of several fundamental concepts in political science: the state, the social contract, democracy, authority. Consequently, Trumpism's ideological cocktail systematically dismantles the classical paradigms of political modernity.

**Keywords:** Trumpism; Authoritarianism; American Conservatism, Postmodern Politics; Reactionary Thought; Democratic Erosion

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## 1. Introduction

Trumpism does not constitute a mere internal evolution of American conservatism but rather represents a malignant ideological outgrowth that has reconfigured the doctrinal architecture of the Republican Party from within. While postwar Republicanism was historically anchored in core conservative tenets – free-market economics, constitutional order, limited government, and a pro-Atlanticist geopolitical orientation – Trumpism introduces a radically distinct ideological mutation. This transformation has not arisen through any coherent doctrinal reformulation but through the discursive colonization of the Republican imaginary by a populist, sovereigntist, and deeply resentful worldview.

Historically, the Republican Party has encompassed a heterogeneous coalition – traditional conservatives, libertarians, and various populist strands. What distinguishes Trumpism, however, is its capacity to forge a fragile but operational coalition that unites these otherwise disparate factions under a singular political identity. This alliance brings together MAGA populists, alt-right adepts, tech-oriented libertarians, and the remnants of the traditional establishment, often described as “Country Club” Republicans, all animated by a vehemently anti-liberal and anti-elitist rhetoric that resonates deeply with significant segments of the party’s base. As Stefan Borg, Professor of Political Science at the Swedish Defence University, aptly observed in relation to the phenomenon of all-catch fusion ideology: “One of the more important consequences of Trump’s capture of the Republican Party was that it opened up space for a radical questioning of received dogmas within the broader conservative intellectual movement”. (Borg, 2024, p. 2235)

This dynamic has reshaped the internal balance of power and signals a profound reorganization of the party’s ideological and institutional contours. As Thibault Muzergues pointed out: “MAGA-World’s general view can be characterised as illiberal (that is, authoritarian-leaning) – or, to use their own terminology, post-liberal. Its supporters believe that liberalism has failed and seek to recreate an order based on traditional values – something that involves an active participation (even at times coercion) from the state and also includes forcing a changing of the elites (a “regime change”, as political theorist and liberalism-critic Patrick Deneen puts it). They aim to return to a perceived golden age”. (Muzergues, 2025)

We are thus witnessing a profound ideological metamorphosis within the Republican Party, wherein Trumpism not only disrupts the doctrinal status quo but engenders a genuine paradigmatic shift. In this context, the Republican Party ceases to function as a coherent ideological actor and increasingly becomes an affective-political vehicle for a revisionist imaginary. Whereas Reaganite conservatism once promoted optimism and faith in democratic institutions, the discourse of Trumpism offers a decadent, apocalyptic vision of the nation – one in decline, held hostage by foreign elites, and redeemable only through a symbolic and radical restoration. The erosion of cultural hegemony by the traditional conservative establishment has created an ideological vacuum, which Trumpism has filled with a volatile mix of nativism, conspiracy thinking, and media-fuelled militancy. In this sense, Trumpism should not be interpreted as a variation of conservatism but as a distinct form of Authoritarian neo-populism one that parasitizes the Republican framework to legitimize a de-institutionalizing political project. What is at stake, therefore, is not merely the future trajectory of the Republican Party but the very boundaries within which a democratic right can still be meaningfully: “The United States is a resilient democracy but during the first year of the Trump administration, the country has been torn apart in the bitter clash between the dystopian vision and divisive politics of the president and the forces resisting his policies on issues such as the investigation into Russian meddling in American elections, reforms to immigration policy and the fate of the Dreamers, the decimation of the Environmental Protection Agency, and culture wars over racial, religious, and sexual politics.” (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 24)

This reconfiguration is not merely ideological but also sociological, reflecting a reordering of class and cultural alliances that underpin the Republican electorate. Trumpism has successfully transformed the anxieties of a declining middle class and a deindustrialized rural America into a politically exploitable asset, thereby redrawing the traditional ideological cleavages. The political and ideological ascendancy of the MAGA movement, as captured in the cited ob-

servation, underscores a critical and often overlooked dynamic in contemporary American politics: the erosion of working-class allegiances to the liberal left. This phenomenon reflects a broader failure of progressive forces to maintain a coherent socioeconomic agenda capable of addressing the material precarity and cultural dislocation experienced by large segments of the working class. This phenomenon – the recapturing of a significant portion of the traditional electoral base of the American liberal left – has also been astutely observed by John Bellamy Foster, Professor of Sociology at the University of Oregon and editor of *Monthly Review*: “The political and ideological successes of the MAGA movement were made possible in part by a liberal-left that abandoned the working class economically and politically.” (Foster, 2025)

In privileging identity-based discourses and technocratic neoliberal policies over redistributive economic justice and class solidarity, the liberal-left inadvertently ceded ideological terrain to a populist right that rearticulated working-class grievances through a nativist and anti-elitist lens. As a result, the MAGA movement capitalized on this vacuum, translating ressentiment and socio-economic disaffection into a potent form of reactionary mobilization. The implication is not merely a partisan realignment, but a deeper crisis of political representation and ideological coherence within the liberal tradition itself. At the spectral and ideological level, we are witnessing the rise of an authoritarian post-liberalism that contests the foundational tenets of the modern liberal order – universalism, the rule of law, and pluralism – and instead promotes a model of governance based on concentrated executive authority, normative moralism, and the restoration of a presumed natural social order.

The analysis unfolds in four sections. It first conceptualises Trumpism as a post-democratic mutation within the conservative tradition, then examines the ideological contributions of Michael Anton and Russell Vought through the lenses of Straussian political thought and Christian nationalism. The methodological section introduces the relational proximity index used to measure their influence within the executive core, followed by a concluding synthesis that situates Trumpism as a hybrid formation of reactionary political theology and executive aggrandisement.

## **2. Trump's Ideological Engineers: Russell Vought and Michael Anton**

Beyond conventional taxonomies employed by political science, the present analysis seeks to identify the theorists – however marginal or unorthodox – whose ideas have decisively shaped the ideological architecture of Trumpism. This inquiry seeks to foreground two central figures in the ideological constellation of Trumpism – individuals who cannot be reduced to mere external commentators or abstract theorists, but who are, in fact, deeply enmeshed within the institutional fabric of the Trump administration: Russell Vought and Michael Anton. Far from being detached intellectuals, they operate at the intersection of political theory and praxis, shaping the contours of public policy from positions of considerable authority within the executive branch. Their dual role – as both theorists of a distinctive vision of political order and as high-ranking officials entrusted with its implementation – renders them uniquely illustrative of the fusion between ideological production and state power in the contemporary American context.

We elected to quantify the influence exerted by the two ideologues on Trump through Strategic Influence Analysis and Influence Mapping. To this effect, we applied the Relational Proximity Index, a metric that gauges the magnitude of their sway over Trump's decision-making

cadre as well as over Trump himself. Furthermore, we utilised a formalised strategic analysis instrument employed to evaluate trajectories of growth and strategic influence. Roger Cobb, Jennie-Keith Ross, and Marc Howard Ross formulated the Agenda Building Model, which elucidates how advisers shape political agendas and policymaking by advancing issues and values. Among the models proposed by Cobb and Ross to explicate how certain issues ascend to the political agenda is the Inside Access Model. According to these analytical paradigms, actors with direct and proximate access to decision-makers can introduce matters straight onto the formal agenda, circumventing the need to first escalate them onto the public agenda.

Russell Vought is an American government official and conservative political analyst who has served as the Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) since February 2025. He previously held this position from July 2020 until January 2021. Identifying as a Christian nationalist, Vought founded the Centre for Renewing America, an organization dedicated to opposing critical race theory and advocating the conception of the United States as a “nation under God.” Moreover, he has played a prominent role in Project 2025, an initiative spearheaded by the Heritage Foundation that seeks to promote conservative policies and fundamentally restructure the federal government. In May 2024, he was appointed as the Policy Director of the Republican National Committee’s platform committee. His status as a grey eminence within the Trump 2.0 administration, coupled with his steadfast pursuit and implementation of radical ideas through public policy, leads certain analysts to portray Russell Vought in rather sombre terms: “He has frightening level of understanding of how to execute his vision from the top down with the full weight of the presidency behind him as an unofficial prime minister”. (Brown, 2024)

### **3. Methodological Framework for Assessing Ideological Proximity**

In order to move beyond impressionistic attributions of ideological impact, the paper employs a relational proximity index devised by the author to evaluate the positional influence of Michael Anton and Russell Vought within the decision-making core of the Trump administration. The index is designed as a heuristic model, not a causal or statistical measure, aimed at mapping each actor’s degree of nearness to the ultimate executive centre embodied by Donald Trump. The relational proximity index aggregates observable indicators of proximity along both institutional and cognitive dimensions. Each actor’s score (ranging from 0 to 1) reflects the extent to which his or her ideas, institutional roles, and communication channels intersect with the presidential decision-making network. Four indicators were coded: 1/ institutional embeddedness within or around the Executive Office of the President; 2/ access and interaction frequency with the president or senior advisors; 3/ policy resonance, identified through thematic convergence between the ideologue’s positions and key administrative documents; 4/ visibility and discursive alignment in public or media communications. The relational proximity index was constructed by the author as a heuristic tool to evaluate the relative influence of Michael Anton and Russell Vought within the Trumpist ideological field. The index aggregates different types of observable links – organizational affiliations, textual references, rhetorical or policy alignments, and public endorsements – each coded on a 0–2 scale according to intensity and recency. The resulting figures are entirely based on the author’s own coding and calculations, derived from publicly available documents, speeches, and media sources.

According to the Relational Proximity Index (see the schematic below), Russell Vought exerts his greatest influence on the command mechanisms within the Trump administration, specifically in relation to: 1/ Direct and frequent interaction with Trump and senior officials (Very High); with regard to the subject of influence, the centre of decision-making, the score is designated as the Reference Point; meanwhile, his influence over actors such as Senior Advisors and the close circle influencing Trump's decisions is rated as High. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1

Actor	Relational Proximity Index	Degree of Proximity	Notes
Russell Vought	0.87	Very High	Direct and frequent interaction with Trump and senior officials
Donald Trump	1.00	Reference Point	Subject of influence; centre of decision-making
Senior Advisors	0.75	High	Close circle influencing Trump's decisions
White House Staff	0.65	Moderate to High	Regular contact, but less direct influence
Broader Administration	0.40	Moderate	Indirect influence through policy implementation

The second influential name in Donald Trump's second administration is Michael Anton, a prominent American conservative intellectual, essayist, and political strategist. Anton's career spans both the political and corporate spheres. He has served as a speechwriter for influential figures such as Rupert Murdoch, Rudy Giuliani, and Condoleezza Rice. In the private sector, he held senior communication roles, including Director of Communications at Citigroup and Managing Director at the global investment firm BlackRock. Anton's trajectory through high-level posts in both government and finance, combined with his continued influence on national security and policy discourse, underscores his enduring prominence in the landscape of American conservative politics. He previously occupied a senior role in the first Trump administration, acting as Deputy Assistant to the President for Strategic Communications on the National Security Council between 2017 and 2018. Anton is currently serving as Director of Policy Planning in the second Trump administration, a position he has held since January 2025.

A conceptual "influence map" would visually place Donald Trump at the centre (Index: 1.00), surrounded concentrically by actors in descending order of influence: Inner Circle: Michael Anton (High proximity – 0.82 –, especially in areas of national security, speechwriting, and strategic messaging); Russell Vought (Very high proximity – 0.87 –, with strong influence on public policy and budgetary frameworks). This layered structure captures both formal administrative power and informal ideological influence, with Anton situated firmly in the strategic-intellectual nucleus of Trump's second administration. (See Figure 2)

Figure 2

Actor	Relational Proximity Index	Degree of Proximity	Notes
Michael Anton	0.82	High	Held senior national security roles and remains a key policy advisor
Donald Trump	1.00	Reference Point	Central figure; subject of Anton's influence and strategic alignment
National Security Council (NSC)	0.85	Very High	Direct involvement as Deputy Assistant to the President (2017–2018)
Senior Policy Advisors	0.75	High	Collaborated with and influenced Trump's ideological and security agenda
Broader Administration	0.50	Moderate	Indirect influence through written work and strategic planning

#### 4. Authoritarian Reinterpretation of Leo Strauss's Political Philosophy

Michael Anton was trained in the intellectual atmosphere of the Claremont Institute think tank, which has arguably surpassed even the venerable Heritage Foundation in terms of assertive ideological production. While Heritage continues to wield significant influence in shaping policy and staffing Republican administrations, Claremont has positioned itself as a crucible for post-liberal, nationalist conservatism.

American conservatives of the Claremont Institute always derive their intellectual debt from the political philosopher Leo Strauss, whose ideas they see as essential to the theoretical rediscovery of America's constitutional order. Not only is Strauss considered a scholar of the classics but also as one who provides a principled framework by which the American Founding can be read as representative of abiding natural law, reason, and moral order, and not as something contingent upon Enlightenment liberalism. At the centre of this appropriation lies Strauss's critique of moral relativism and historicism, generally considered corrupting to both philosophical clarity and political order by Claremont thinkers. Thus, Strauss offers a strong counterpoint to progressive and egalitarian orthodoxy, basing a conservative defence of the American order as initially conceived – on universals rather than historical chance. The intellectual connection between Leo Strauss and the Claremont Institute is cemented further through thinkers like Harry Jaffa, whose Straussian interpretation of Abraham Lincoln gave definition to a vision of 'constitutional patriotism' based on the moral and philosophical purpose of the Founders. Straussianism has thus been reframed through such thinkers not only as an interpretive school but as the philosophical centre of a political project – i.e., the defence and revitalization of the American regime against postmodern relativism's disintegrative pressure.

While Heritage continues to wield significant influence in shaping policy and staffing Republican administrations, Claremont has positioned itself as a crucible for post-liberal, nationalist conservatism. Through initiatives such as the Publius Fellows program, its publication *The American Mind*, and a network of West Coast Straussianists, the Institute has cultivated a distinct intellectual milieu – one that conceives the political contest not simply in terms of pol-

icy disputes, but as a metaphysical struggle over the soul of the American regime. Alumni such as Michael Anton, Ryan P. Williams, and John Eastman have assumed pivotal roles in shaping both the rhetorical and institutional agendas of what may become a more ideologically coherent second Trump administration.

Whereas East Coast Straussians – associated with the neoconservative elite of Washington, D.C., including figures such as Bill Kristol, Robert Kagan, and Paul Wolfowitz – have largely maintained a commitment to liberal internationalism, the West Coast Straussians have embraced an intellectually militant nationalism.

Central to Michael Anton's perspective is the conviction that liberal modernity – defined by relativism, secularism, and multiculturalism – has corroded the civic and moral foundations of the republic. Accordingly, he advocates for a restoration of classical virtue, guided by a meritocratic elite attuned to the metaphysical stakes of political life.

In this framework, democracy is not treated as an intrinsic good, but as an instrumental mechanism – valuable only insofar as it serves higher civilizational ends. Anton exemplifies the translation of West Coast Straussianism into policy frames oriented around immigration restriction, cultural identity, and the defence of Western civilization. In doing so, he enacts a mutation of Straussian elitism into a form of civilizational populism – one that lends philosophical legitimacy to a post-liberal conservatism rooted in existential conflict, sovereign decisionism, and an antagonistic friend-enemy binary.

Anton's political project is predicated upon a radical break with classical American liberalism. Drawing heavily on Carl Schmitt – particularly his concept of sovereignty as the authority to decide on the exception. In this Schmittian imaginary, reinterpreted through Michael Anton's ultraconservative reasoning, Donald Trump assumes the role of the sovereign – a figure who must act beyond the constraints of liberal legality to restore both political and moral order. Drawing on Carl Schmitt's definition of the “state of exception” (German: *Ausnahmezustand*) and adapting it to the political and civilizational context of the United States, Michael Anton argues that the contemporary U.S. is caught in a terminal civilizational crisis. By extension, the entire West is undergoing a profound moral decline. At the heart of his thought lies the assertion that the United States is undergoing irreversible decline, precipitated by mass immigration, elite-sponsored multiculturalism, militant secularism, and moral relativism. For Anton, this is not merely a sociopolitical downturn, but a regime-level crisis requiring exceptional intervention.

Resolution, he contends, requires the authoritarian assertion of executive power. Within this conceptual framework, legal norms are subordinated to the imperatives of cultural preservation, and political authority supplants constitutional proceduralism as the foundation of order. The rule of law is reinterpreted through the lens of charismatic legitimacy, embodied in the figure of the leader as the interpreter of the people's will.

This sacralization of Trump is further reinforced by the post-secular political culture cultivated by segments of the religious alt-right and radical evangelical movements. Within this ecosystem, Trump is endowed with a quasi-messianic status – not merely as a political leader, but as a divinely appointed guardian of tradition, national sovereignty, and civilizational purity. This transfiguration casts him as an “lay pope” – a secular redeemer who fuses political sovereignty with spiritual authority. Michael Anton thus emerges as one of the foremost intellectual voices of Trumpism, articulating a radicalized form of conservatism that weds civilizational pessimism with authoritarian salvationism.

The theme of the populist far right's need to impose salvific and messianic figures onto the political stage, within the context of authoritarian salvationism, has been explored by numerous scholars across the fields of political science, sociology, and political theory. In his book *What Is Populism?* (2016), Jan-Werner Müller examines how populist movements, often on the right, seek charismatic leaders who present themselves as the sole "saviour" of the nation, thereby legitimising a politics that justifies the suspension of democratic norms in the name of the "pure" will of the people. Müller defines the populist leaders as political actors who are charismatic and possess an aura of almost theologically sanctioned authority, who claim to know better than anyone else what the people truly desire, and who embody the miraculous solution to translate the profound aspirations of the "forgotten people" into a salvific political project: "They and they alone speak in the name of what they tend to call the «real people» or the «silent majority»" (Müller, 2016, p. 10)

Trumpist intellectuals such as Michael Anton, shaped by the ideological milieu of the Claremont Institute, put forward the idea that, alongside a charismatic and authoritarian leader, a "virtuous" elite must guide the masses – whether through populist rhetoric or by cultivating a mythic patriotic ethos. For the Straussian-oriented Trumpists, the regime of the American liberal left is seen as being in profound crisis: it is no longer legitimate, no longer a cultivator of virtue, but rather of corruption. Hence, the call for a "regime reset" – including, potentially, through the ascent of authoritarian figures such as the "Red Caesar", a concept popularised by Anton. The expression "Red Caesar" is most prominently used by Michael Anton in his 2020 book *The Stakes: America at the Point of No Return*. There, he explores the idea of a political strongman – halfway between monarchy and tyranny – emerging in response to what he perceives as civic decay. In Max Weber's terms, Trumpism represents a shift away from legal-rational authority toward charismatic authority, where legitimacy is grounded not in law or tradition but in personal appeal and the invocation of existential threat.

Anton frames Trump's return to "the people" in terms reminiscent of the authoritarianism of Roman imperators, arguing that the vote of "deep America" is not merely ignored, but frequently redirected through administrative engineering to serve the aims of the progressive Democratic elite. As he puts it: "when popular majorities produce outcomes the rulers don't like, their devotion to «democracy» instantly evaporates. Judges, administrative state agencies, private companies – whichever is most able in the moment to overturn the will of unruly voters – will intervene to restore ruling class diktats." (Anton, 2021)

This line of reasoning positions Trump not as a violator of democratic norms, but as a restorer of popular sovereignty in the face of an increasingly technocratic and ideologically partisan regime. Michael Anton's quote underscores a central critique advanced by Trumpism against contemporary liberalism: the notion that the progressive elite invoke democracy only insofar as electoral outcomes align with their preferences but subsequently resort to bureaucratic and institutional mechanisms to neutralise the popular will. This perspective reflects an endorsement of a model of "electoralism without liberalism" (Zakaria, 1997), wherein the ballot box is conceived as the sole legitimate expression of popular sovereignty, while liberal constraints – such as the separation of powers, judicial independence, or the protection of minority rights – are seen as obstacles engineered by an elite that betrays the authentic democratic mandate. Andreas Schedler elaborates on this model through the concept of "electoral authoritarianism," referring to regimes that simulate democratic competition while hollowing out its procedural and liberal core. (Schedler, 2016)

Michael Anton's critique of liberal democracy is rooted in the belief that it has been usurped by a cultural oligarchy hostile to the genuine will of the people. In response, Anton advocates a temporary suspension of liberal norms to restore a pre-constitutional regime grounded in natural rights and moral clarity. For Anton, democracy is a means, not an end – a tool to be used in the service of civilizational preservation.

The consequences of such toxic ideas for American democracy verge on the catastrophic. From the perspective of political philosophy, the classical contractualism of Locke, Rousseau – which defined the state as the expression of a rational collective will and as a guarantor of natural rights (liberty, property, security) – tends to be overshadowed. The state is no longer conceived as a rational convention but rather as an organic expression of a closed community: the “real people,” purified ethnically, religiously, or ideologically. Theorists such as Carl Schmitt are indirectly rehabilitated through the notion that sovereignty resides in the authority to decide the exception, and that the enemy is essential to the cohesion of the political. From “Red Caesar” to the Führerprinzip is but a single step away from the abyss.

## 5. Vought and the Reconstitutionalisation of the State

Russell Vought emerges as a pivotal figure whose ideological ambitions extend beyond mere reinterpretation of the American constitutional order. His project aims to fundamentally reengineer the architecture of the modern administrative state. At the core of Vought's vision lies what he describes as a doctrine of “radical constitutionalism” – a concept which, in practice, entails a destabilizing redefinition of executive authority. As Vought himself asserts: “The Right needs to throw off the precedents and legal paradigms that have wrongly developed over the last two hundred years and to study carefully the words of the Constitution and how the Founders would have responded in modern situations to the encroachments of other branches” (Vought, 2022).

Within this framework, the Constitution is interpreted as granting the President exclusive and unchecked control over the executive branch, thereby invalidating the legitimacy of independent regulatory agencies. Likewise, congressional budgetary authority and lower-court judicial review are dismissed as illegitimate constraints on presidential prerogative. This radical reinterpretation effectively annuls the classical mechanisms of checks and balances, recasting them as mere bureaucratic impediments to sovereign executive rule.

This assertion of presidential supremacy is underpinned by a theological-political vision that Vought defines explicitly as Christian nationalism. In this paradigm, the state ceases to serve as a neutral arbiter among competing value systems and instead becomes an instrument for the enforcement of a narrow, evangelical interpretation of moral order. Vought has made public statements to the effect that non-Christians are condemned, and that public policy should reflect “traditional Christian values” – thus rejecting the liberal-democratic separation of church and state in favour of a theocratic cultural mission.

Institutionally, this ideology was operationalized during Vought's tenure as Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), where he redefined the agency not as a technocratic evaluator of fiscal policy, but as the “control tower” of the president's ideological agenda. According to Vought, the role of the OMB is not to neutrally assess competing policy alternatives, but to ensure that only those initiatives aligned with presidential values are permitted to “take

off.” This politicization of the federal bureaucracy illustrates his commitment to a monocratic vision of executive governance, one in which dissenting institutions are neutralized or eliminated.

Vought’s most ambitious and comprehensive policy blueprint is articulated in Project 2025, a 900-page strategic roadmap for a second Trump administration, developed in conjunction with the Heritage Foundation. This document envisions a complete restructuring of the American state, including the dismissal of tens of thousands of civil servants, the consolidation of policymaking within the Executive Office of the President, and the defunding or deactivation of agencies that diverge from the administration’s ideological trajectory. The project further proposes sweeping deregulation, particularly in the domains of environmental protection, public health, and civil rights – measures justified under the guise of administrative efficiency and the assertion of “national values.” Project 2025 operationalises this vision through four key strategies: (1) dismantling or restructuring federal agencies seen as vehicles of secular progressivism; (2) redefining the Department of Health and Human Services as a “Department of Life” to reject abortion rights; (3) promoting a biblically grounded conception of marriage and family, with broad religious exemptions; and (4) consolidating presidential control over the civil service to ensure ideological alignment. Collectively, these measures seek to institutionalise a Christian nationalist moral framework within the state apparatus, curtail secular pluralism, and reassert Christianity as the organising principle of American governance.

What Vought ultimately advocates is a reconstitutionalization of the American state – a return to a reimagined constitutional essence in which the presidency embodies undivided sovereign authority. Framed in the rhetoric of originalism and executive efficiency, this project serves to legitimate the dismantling of institutional pluralism and the concentration of power in the hands of a singular ideological executive. In this light, Vought’s vision is not merely administrative reform, but a radical redefinition of American governance along authoritarian and theocratic lines, cloaked in the language of constitutional fidelity. As William E. Scheuerman, professor of Political Science and International Studies at Indiana University, warned: “Trump’s political resurrection may be farcical, yet no one should underestimate the existential dangers it poses to an embattled US constitutional democracy.” (Scheuerman, 2025)

## **6. Russell Vought and the Ideological Foundations of Christian Nationalism**

Analyses such as the Who is Project 2025 co-author Russ Vought and what is his ideology? (Townley, 2025) and A Crisis in the US Federal Government (Winthrop, 2025) emphasise his promotion of the unitary executive theory, his resistance to congressional spending authority, and his strategic aim to consolidate presidential power within a conservative nationalist framework. The publication The Conversation (Genieys & Darviche, 2025) identifies Vought’s imprint on the Republican Party’s governance philosophy, while Beth Reinhard’s Washington Post investigation (“How Russell Vought’s ‘Radical Constitutionalism’ Could Reshape American Government,” 2025) depicts him as a principal architect of an ideology that recentres political authority in the presidency. Vought’s notion of a “post-constitutional era” implies that traditional checks should be overridden to restore conservative control – an idea rooted in his Christian nationalist worldview.

Vought’s Christian nationalism departs sharply from classical conservatism. Whereas the latter values limited government, pluralism, and the institutional balance envisaged by the

Founders, Vought's model advances a theologically defined state identity that integrates Christian doctrine into public governance. His framework recasts conservatism into an assertive, exclusivist project that legitimises expanded executive power as the institutional guarantor of Christian moral order. In this sense, the traditional defence of limited government becomes an activist mission to Christianise state authority, grounded in the belief that America's rights and duties are divinely ordained.

Several analyses describe Vought as a "shadow president" (Kroll, 2025), orchestrating an ideological project to permeate the federal bureaucracy with Christian nationalist principles. He envisions the United States as "a Christian nation, where our rights and duties are understood to come from God," while insisting on "an institutional separation between church and state, but not a separation of Christianity from government and society". (Ward, 2024) Professor of History from Calvin University, Kristin Du Mez, characterises this as "a vision for seizing power and using that power to usher in a Christian America," one that risks eroding pluralism and producing a two-tier citizenry: "There will be no meaningful religious liberty. There will be essentially a two-tier society between the quote unquote, real Americans – those who buy into this, or pretend to – and then the rest of Americans." (Felsen, 2025).

Vought's discourse situates political conflict within an explicitly eschatological horizon, casting the Trump movement as a redemptive force in a civilisational struggle between sacred order and secular decay. His invocation of Trump as a providential "gift from God" recasts political leadership in theological terms, fusing charisma with divine mandate and transforming the contest for power into a drama of salvation. Such rhetoric reveals a political theology of disruption: a conscious willingness to subvert bureaucratic rationality and to reconstitute authority through fear, obedience, and the assertion of spiritual sovereignty. In this sense, Vought's ideological imprint lends the Trumpist project its militant and sacral dimension, positioning him as both theorist and strategist of a reactionary restoration of divine order within the state. Ultimately, this synthesis identifies Russell Vought as a pivotal figure in the re-theologisation of American conservatism. His fusion of Christian nationalism, radical constitutionalism, and executive aggrandisement exemplifies the contemporary mutation of political theology into a governing rationale – one that sanctifies the expansion of executive power as both an act of faith and an instrument of redemption in the post-secular political imagination of the American right.

## 7. Conclusion

The analysis of the toxic ideological constructs advanced by Michael Anton and Russell Vought, and of their influence on Donald Trump's style of executive leadership, reveals not merely a degenerative mutation within the intellectual tradition of American republicanism but, more profoundly, a direct assault on the philosophical foundations of liberal democracy itself. Their respective projects – Straussian civilisational exceptionalism and Christian nationalist radical constitutionalism – converge in legitimising an illiberal redefinition of sovereignty, one that subordinates legality to will and transforms the state into an instrument of ideological restoration.

Trumpism thus articulates a paradoxical logic: it professes to revive democratic rule through the empowerment of the "authentic people," yet in practice corrodes the essential principles of democracy – universalism, procedural legitimacy, and institutional constraint. The re-

sult is a form of majoritarian ethnocracy fundamentally at odds with the liberal-democratic order. Rather than reinvigorating civic life, Trumpism signals a rebellion against political modernity itself: a form of neo-republican archaism imbued with ethno-nationalist and theological overtones that destabilises the normative and institutional architecture of democracy.

This transformation also mirrors a deeper crisis of political representation. The erosion of cultural hegemony within the traditional conservative establishment has produced an ideological vacuum that Trumpism has filled with a volatile blend of nativism, conspiratorial imagination, and media-fuelled militancy. Where Reaganite conservatism once embodied optimism and trust in institutions, Trumpist discourse now projects a dystopian vision of America – besieged by internal enemies and redeemable only through a politics of purification. In this sense, Trumpism cannot be viewed as a renewal of conservatism but as an illiberal neo-populism that parasitises the Republican framework to legitimise the de-institutionalisation of democratic governance. What is ultimately at stake is not the partisan fate of the Republican Party, but the preservation of the philosophical boundaries within which a democratic right can still exist in the United States.

## Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## About the author

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