

Conservatism or Populism? It's a False Choice

WSJ [wsj.com/articles/conservatism-populism-false-choice-republican-6745f3a4](https://www.wsj.com/articles/conservatism-populism-false-choice-republican-6745f3a4)

October 2, 2023

Oct. 2, 2023 11:54 am ET



Sen. Josh Hawley (R., Mo.) in Washington, Sept. 7. Photo: Al Drago/Bloomberg News
John Danforth, the former senator from Missouri, rightly repudiates the populism that stokes ordinary people's grievances and deepens national divisions ("[The GOP Can't Afford to Indulge Populism](#)," op-ed, Sept. 26) but wrongly embraces Sen. Josh Hawley's and former Vice President Mike Pence's invidious distinction between conservatism and populism. Another understanding of populism—one that respects ordinary people's beliefs and communities and advances their interests, not least through responsible constitutional government—fits well with the "principled conservative party" that Mr. Danforth wishes to restore.

Edmund Burke, whom Mr. Danforth recognizes as "the father of conservatism," [combined the defense of freedom with populist sympathies](#). Central to his enduring criticism of the French Revolution's perverted understanding of liberty—derived from "men of letters" who cultivated

contempt for established institutions and promoted radical change—was the conviction that family, community and national life in Britain endowed ordinary people with habits of ordered liberty.

Seminal figures in the post-World War II American conservative movement have also seen an alliance with the people as essential to conserving freedom. To name two: In 1955, in National Review’s mission statement, William F. Buckley defended “the organic moral order”—home to ordinary people—against the “ideologues” and “intellectual class” who wish to instruct and supervise them.

In 1985, Irving Kristol argued in these pages (“The New Populism: Not to Worry,” July 25, 1985) that the people were understandably “outraged, over the past 20 years, by the persistent un-wisdom of their elected and appointed officials.” The debacles of the 1960s and 1970s, in providing education, fighting crime and conducting diplomacy, fostered Kristol’s sympathy for a populism seeking “to bring our governing elites to their senses” in the name of “good constitutional government.”

Since then, the need for a well-wrought conservative-populist alliance has only grown more acute.

Peter Berkowitz

Senior fellow, Hoover Institution

Washington

Mr. Berkowitz was director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, 2019-21.

Appeared in the October 3, 2023, print edition as 'Conservatism or Populism? It’s a False Choice'.