



Postliberalism and the 2024 Election

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Abstract

The label “postliberalism” applies to a developing ecosystem of illiberal ideological thought in the Anglo-American world. Its usage is not singular and as a self-applied term, postliberalism can refer to a strain of British critical theology and communitarianism, a vision of American political Catholicism, and an update to the paleoconservative lineage of the US old right. Postliberalism now also characterizes American illiberal thought writ large (ranging from religious illiberalism to statist nationalism to tech-right variants), as well as the mass politics of ideological reaction. The 2024 election represents a triumphal moment for postliberalism in this broader sense, most directly through the choice of self-described postliberal J. D. Vance as vice presidential candidate for the Republican Party, President Donald Trump’s forthrightly postliberal election campaign, and the reactionary-reformist governance agenda of the new Trump II administration. In doing so, postliberalism characterizes not only a collection of ideas and policy orientations, but also a varied and dynamic network of individuals moving from political marginality to considerable importance. The outcome of the 2024 election and initial subsequent governing experience likely confirms that postliberalism will remain an important part of the ideological matrix of the American right for years to come.

Keywords: postliberalism, illiberalism, ideologies, political reaction, US politics, 2024 presidential election

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The label “postliberalism” applies to a developing ecosystem of illiberal ideological thought in the Anglo-American world. As a conceptual term of art and a label increasingly chosen by practitioners themselves, it captures overlapping, but diverse, thought collectives of intellectuals, theorists, political entrepreneurs, and activists who have gained prominence especially since the 2016 US elections. Its usage remains eclectic and varied but has gathered steam as a term of choice among a variety of figures prominent in American and American-influenced right-wing circles.

Most interestingly, postliberalism has escaped from its confines among small groups of ideological entrepreneurs and can aid outside observers in helpfully characterizing new political phenomena. The 2024 US election—most importantly the choice of then Senator J. D. Vance as vice presidential candidate for the Republican Party and the subsequent victory of former President Donald Trump on a campaign of immigration restriction, economic protectionism, aggressive anti-elite bureaucratic reform, and moral-cultural reaction—represents a triumphal moment for postliberal thought.

The events of 2024 can indeed be described analytically through a specifically postliberal ideological lens. By doing so, we can capture both a collection of ideas, worldview, and policy orientations of increasing relevance, as well as characterize an evolving network of identifiably postliberal-tagged individuals moving from political marginality to significant national influence as part of a reactionary-reformist governing agenda. Put simply, 2024 was the United States’ first postliberal election.

Although ideological trajectories are difficult to predict, it is likely the case that the campaign experience and ultimate outcome of the 2024 election ensures that postliberalism of one variety, or more likely several, will remain an important part of the broader ideological matrix on the American right for years to come. We must come to grips with what we mean by this term in the first place, and in turn what it means for the evolving politics of the oldest democracy in the world.

This analytic essay first provides an initial overview of the evolving use of postliberalism as a term of art in the Anglo-American world, focusing primarily on practitioners, but one that interacts well with existing scholarly research programs on “illiberalism” and can helpfully describe emerging political trends in the US for outside observers. Academic acceptance of postliberalism as a clarifying ideological descriptor aligns with new usage patterns employed by the mainstream English-language news media, which are increasingly deploying the term as well. The label “postliberalism” captures several reference groups, from British communitarians to American Catholics, to a new generation of paleoconservatives and the broader and diverse modern New Right, characterizing many parts of a dynamic ideological ecosystem replete with a variety of eclectic and distinct strands.

With this partial terminological and conceptual genealogy established, the essay then turns to using postliberalism as a productive framework within which to understand the 2024 election and its immediate political results. In doing so, it attempts a melding of scholarly research into illiberalism found elsewhere with a more general analytic interpretation to get at the postliberal question of 2020s-era America. This essay is far from the final word on postliberalism, what it has meant, what it should mean, and what it will mean in the future. Some postliberals may dislike the new broadness assigned to the term. But this essay aims to be a constructive foray into a highly relevant semantic and ideological field that is now far more deeply ensconced within the halls of power than many would have thought possible just a few years prior.

On Postliberalism

2024 marked the year that “postliberalism,” a term of relative recency and already varied usage, entered somewhat surprisingly into the American political lexicon.¹ Unfortunately for us, postliberalism contains a plethora of distinct meanings and traditions of thought in the English-speaking world, although each in its own way holds some degree of broad connection with the others, if sometimes at a distance. And as the 2020s have unfolded, an evolving generic form of postliberal mass politics in the world’s oldest democracy can be identified, culminating thus far in the Trump campaign of 2024 and its initial period of governance in 2025.

In order to understand the postliberal moment of the 2024 election and its consequences, we need to first briefly (and surely insufficiently) recapitulate the many intellectual threads that brought this previously unfamiliar term and its users to recent prominence. In doing so, we will ultimately connect these usage patterns by those calling themselves postliberals with broader descriptions of illiberal ideological reaction, the American version of which can ultimately be captured by the same term. In brief, postliberalism began as a self-identified label; evolved into a label taken on by different actors to describe distinct strains of critical illiberal thought; and has emerged since the 2024 election as a useful, actor-acceptable, and comprehensive term to describe American illiberalism writ large both in theory and praxis.

In undertaking this survey, what is perhaps most surprising is how the very small numbers of self-described postliberal intellectual entrepreneurs (and the ideas and general framework of politics to which they are committed) have grown to become so influential and have so quickly found expression in American national politics. Part of the answer lies in the expanding definition of the term, which has moved considerably from its origin point and now contains fairly different and distinct elements that all hold a general ideological family resemblance.

Three Self-Described Postliberal Circles

In the most straightforward genealogy, the term “postliberalism” is British in origin. It refers first to a *theological-critical and communitarian* reconstruction of religious narratives by way of postmodern philosophical linguistic tools after (*ergo*, “post-”) the transformation of mainline hierarchical Christian churches and the dominance of mid-century liberal theology.² This idea, of course, was not necessarily intended to be conservative or right-wing (indeed, in important ways it shares more with continental Christian socialist traditions). But it was also certainly more orthodox relative to the *de facto* partial secularization of mainstream religious establishments and their acceptance of atomizing “neoliberal” cultural developments in Western

1 For examples of the term emerging in the mainstream popular press, see for example: Sarah Jones, “J. D. Vance and the Rise of the ‘Postliberal’ Catholics,” *Intelligence*, September 22, 2024, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/j-d-vance-and-the-rise-of-the-postliberal-catholics.html>; Peter and Michelle R. Smith, “What Is Postliberalism? How a Catholic Intellectual Movement Influenced J. D. Vance’s Political Views,” *PBS News Hour*, September 4, 2024, sec. Politics, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/what-is-postliberalism-how-a-catholic-intellectual-movement-influenced-jd-vances-political-views>; Ian Ward, “The Seven Thinkers and Groups That Have Shaped J. D. Vance’s Unusual Worldview,” *Politico*, July 18, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/07/18/jd-vance-world-view-sources-00168984>; Ross Douthat, “Who Abandoned Liberalism First, the Populists or the Establishment?” *New York Times*, November 1, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/01/opinion/liberals-populists.html>; Patrick J. Deneen and Samuel Moyn, “Post-Liberalism in Conversation: Liberalism and Its Fate” (lecture, The George Washington University, Washington, DC, February 28, 2025), <https://calendar.gwu.edu/event/post-liberalism-in-conversation-liberalism-and-its-fate>.

2 See, for example: John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998); George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984). Postliberalism also shares an intellectual background associated with the virtue ethics derived from, among others: Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edition (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

societies over the last half century.³ Thus emerged the original postliberal critique from a fairly discipline-specific vantage point.

Most expressly pushed forward under the “postliberal” label through the theological project of John Milbank and fellow religiously-minded writers, this effort peaked in the 2000s and early 2010s in terms of relative influence among a small collection of thinkers seeking a new philosophical basis for Christian theology. In doing so, the project also engaged broader ideas about the needs of a healthy, re-enanted society with thick community bonds and reduced social and cultural alienation.⁴ This approach intertwined with general critiques of so-called neoliberal economic and social orders also increasingly using the “postliberal” label, including influential British thinkers John Gray and Adrian Pabst.⁵ By the 2020s, the term had fully shifted from its theological roots towards a more general British communitarian critique and platform for critically-oriented academics.⁶

This group’s intellectual cachet, in many ways, was its combination of communitarian and associational critique with a degree of left-right fusion, sometimes called “Blue Labour” or “Red Toryism,” referencing its British origin.⁷ Ultimately, this stream of thought, while giving the term “postliberal” to the English-speaking intellectual world and infusing it with a general association of communitarianism and societal critique, is somewhat detached from later developments in the United States. Its influence on British politics is much less clear than further evolutions in America, although a feedback loop from US postliberal thought back to British writers is also evident.⁸

Postliberalism’s second life is also a religiously-inflected one. In this instance, it refers to a new movement of 21st-century intellectual *political Catholicism*, primarily based in the United States. This ideological project is built around rejecting mid-century and post-Cold War claims of Catholic compatibilities with market capitalism and the secular, socially liberal, individualized and atomized form of the political regime we call liberal democracy.⁹

This new Catholic postliberal approach to political action asserts the necessary and inevitable connection between religion and politics, largely grounded in the Catholic tradition, and asserts a counter-framework that moves away from a strict secular reading of the idea of church-state separation in favor of greater integration and

3 C. C. Pecknold, *Transforming Postliberal Theology: George Lindbeck, Pragmatism and Scripture* (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

4 For one genealogy, see for example: Stefan Borg, “In Search of the Common Good: The Postliberal Project Left and Right,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 27, no. 1 (February 2024): 3–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310231163126>. See also: Ronald T. Michener, *Postliberal Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2013); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

5 Adrian Pabst, *Postliberal Politics: The Coming Era of Renewal* (Medford, Mass.: Polity, 2021); Adrian Pabst, *The Demons of Liberal Democracy* (Medford, Mass.: Polity, 2019); John Gray, *Post-Liberalism: Studies in Political Thought* (London: Routledge, 1996).

6 John Milbank, “John Milbank on The Politics of Virtue—A Postliberal Manifesto,” *Telos Insights* (blog), Telos Paul Piccone Institute, February 17, 2025, <https://insights.telosinstitute.net/p/john-milbank-on-the-politics-of-virtuea>.

7 Maurice Glasman, *Blue Labour: The Politics of the Common Good* (Medford, Mass.: Polity, 2022); Phillip Blond, *Red Tory: How the Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).

8 See, for example, writings under the tag “Post-liberalism,” UnHerd (news site), <https://unherd.com/tag/post-liberalism/>.

9 On the liberal-friendly “Catholic fusionism” of the American right from the 1980s to 2000s, see: Park MacDougald, “A Catholic Debate over Liberalism,” *City Journal*, Winter 2020, <https://www.city-journal.org/article/a-catholic-debate-over-liberalism/>; Kevin Gallagher, “The Eclipse of Catholic Fusionism,” *American Affairs*, August 20, 2018, <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2018/08/the-eclipse-of-catholic-fusionism/>.

alignment between the two.¹⁰ It is characterized most importantly by an emphasis on the use of assertive government activity to pursue ideological goals, interest in economic protectionism to support community cohesion, reasserting the role of the natural law in jurisprudence and governance, and broad-based moral-cultural reaction against 21st-century progressive assumptions about the family, gender, sexual relations, procreation, secularism, in alignment with other social-conservative issue sets.

This strain of intellectualized postliberalism is perhaps the most prominent and well-defined one today. It feeds ideationally from philosophical and theological frameworks nurtured in more radical camps, such as the small clutch of “integralist” thinkers, who argue for a return to the superiority of and deference to the Church as a means of righting the decaying sociopolitical order and aligning with the hierarchical intentions of God.¹¹ Among the integralist-postliberals are the Cistercian monk Father Edmund Waldstein and a small collection of other philosophers such as Thomas Pink, as well as Harvard Law School professor Adrian Vermeule and the political scientist and Hungarian think-tanker Gladden Pappin.¹² Among the non-integralist postliberals are Notre Dame political theorist Patrick Deneen, Catholic University of America theologian Chad Pecknold, and Irish legal theorist Conor Casey, among others.¹³ All integralists are postliberals, but not all postliberals are integralists. However, they do all read each other—and most are mutual friends.

American Catholic postliberalism is notable for its relative academic and institutional heft, and thus its surprisingly high intellectual status despite holding few forthright adherents. Its public proponents sit in established universities, write books in established presses, and most critically, have far more easily reached mainstream liberal and progressive audiences as a kind of curious ideological antagonist. Deneen’s famous *Why Liberalism Failed* (2018, Yale University Press) was plugged by former President and epitome of 2010s establishment liberalism Barack Obama.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the Harvard-based Vermeule is one of the foremost administrative law scholars in the country, and his *Common Good Constitutionalism* (2022, Polity) came out of a tremendously influential article in *The Atlantic* in 2020—another bastion of liberal gentility.¹⁵

Between the two, an entire cottage industry of scandalized critics has emerged to counter them, a phenomenon which itself broadcasts Catholic postliberalism’s intellectual influence and the unexpected consternation it has engendered among a significant cohort of philosophers and legal scholars. And it is therefore primarily

10 For a summary of this approach and relevant citations, see: Julian G. Waller, “Integralism, Political Catholicism, and Actually-Existing Democracy in the Modern West,” in *Social Catholicism for the Twenty-First Century?* vol. 1 of 2, *Historical Perspectives and Constitutional Democracy in Peril*, ed. William F. Murphy Jr. (Pickwick Publications, 2024): 320–353.

11 See, for example: Kevin Vallier, *All the Kingdoms of the World: On Radical Religious Alternatives to Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Thomas Crean and Alan Fimister, *Integralism: A Manual of Political Philosophy* (Editiones Scholasticae, 2020); Edmund Waldstein, O.Cist., “Integralism in Three Sentences,” *The Josias* (blog), October 17, 2016, <https://thejosias.com/2016/10/17/integralism-in-three-sentences/>.

12 See, for example: Edmund Waldstein, O.Cist. and Peter A. Kwasniewski, eds., *Integralism and the Common Good: Selected Essays from The Josias*, 2 vols. (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2021); Adrian Vermeule, “All Human Conflict Is Ultimately Theological,” *Church Life Journal*, July 26, 2019, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/all-human-conflict-is-ultimately-theological/>; Gladden Pappin, Patrick J. Deneen, and Adrian Vermeule, “In God We Trust: Vers un ordre postlibéral?” *L’incorrect*, March 2023, <https://lincorrect.org/in-god-we-trust-vers-un-ordre-postliberal-lincorrect/>.

13 See, for example: Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future* (New York: Sentinel, 2023); Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Gladden Pappin and Chad Pecknold, “A Kingdom Divided,” *The Postliberal Order* (blog), Substack, October 18, 2022, <https://postliberalorder.substack.com/p/a-kingdom-divided>.

14 Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*.

15 Adrian Vermeule, *Common Good Constitutionalism* (Medford, Mass.: Polity, 2022); Adrian Vermeule, “Beyond Originalism,” *The Atlantic*, March 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/common-good-constitutionalism/609037/>.

through Catholic postliberalism that the term first entered American political and intellectual writing.¹⁶ Yet very recently, postliberalism has now been retroactively applied to other intellectual traditions in the US as well, thereby setting it up for usage in a significantly broader manner.

This third vein of postliberalism is now increasingly used to capture an older camp of traditional American conservatism sometimes called “paleoconservatism” and sometimes “the Old Right.”¹⁷ Here, postliberalism is directly used less as a substantive approach itself and more a means to describe the world that is common to this tradition. We can call this the *old right lineage* approach. This camp argues that the classical tradition of liberalism, properly understood, died long ago with the advent of mass politics, universal suffrage, mass immigration, the welfare state, centralized managerial governance, internationalism, and the dissolution of the public-private distinction in law and custom.

For the paleoconservative, there is nothing “liberal” (as it would have been understood in the 19th century, when the term gained common parlance) about 20th-century managerial progressive statism, let alone its 21st-century metastasis. Thus, from this vantage point, we have lived in a *post-liberal* social and political order for many decades, or perhaps even a full century, depending on the thinker. The paleoconservative school is wide and has developed over multiple generations.¹⁸ It includes the political scientist Paul Gottfried, the work of philosopher James Burnham, and various writers on the harder right of the American political spectrum since the Second World War.¹⁹ Its most famous political advocate has been the 1990s-era national-populist politician Patrick Buchanan.²⁰

This way of deploying the “postliberal” term here is new—paleoconservatives have relied on different labels to describe their critiques before—but has been given a revamp in recent years. In this case, the critical paleoconservative tradition has been re-energized by contemporary reaction to the social-cultural radicalization of the 2010s, known to some as the “Great Awakening,” that has taken place among cohorts of elite American left-progressives, as well as its extension through transnational institutions of conformity by way of ideological diffusion and intergovernmental coordination.

This led to the proliferation of culturally progressive governance assumptions throughout the economy and society (such as diversity mandates, de facto speech codes, protest and business restrictions, coercive climate mitigation techniques, and so on), enforced by nominally non-governmental financial, educational, and industry association institutions. The experience of covid lockdowns and other technocratic

16 A related religious political movement in American Protestantism, termed mostly, though not entirely, by outsiders as “Christian nationalism,” clearly also has grown along recognizably postliberal lines. Its adherents do not use the term to describe themselves directly, however, and so we can treat them only below as we expand the label out into a broad analytic descriptor.

17 Paul Gottfried, *A Paleoconservative Anthology: New Voices for an Old Tradition* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781666919721/A-Paleoconservative-Anthology-New-Voices-for-an-Old-Tradition>; Joseph A. Scotchie, *The Paleoconservatives: New Voices of the Old Right* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

18 See, for example: Gottfried, *A Paleoconservative Anthology*; Jean-François Drolet and Michael C. and Williams, “America First: Paleoconservatism and the Ideological Struggle for the American Right,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 25, no. 1 (January 2020): 28–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2020.1699717>; Edward Ashbee, “Politics of Paleoconservatism,” *Society* 37, no. 3 (March 2000): 75–84, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02686179>.

19 See, for example: Paul Gottfried, *Conservatism in America: Making Sense of the American Right* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); James Burnham, *Suicide of the West: An Essay on the Meaning and Destiny of Liberalism* (New York: Encounter Books, 2014); James Burnham, *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom* (London: Lume Books, 2020).

20 For a direct connection made between Buchanan and postliberalism, see: P. J. Butler, “The Once and Future President,” *The American Postliberal* (blog), Substack, July 25, 2023, <https://www.americanpostliberal.com/p/the-once-and-future-president>.

impositions furthered the spread of this critique in the 2020s, providing a lived experience of perceived unaccountable technocratic liberalism that seemed to have very little to do with the freedoms or liberty traditionally associated with the term.

Yet the height of intellectual paleoconservatism was decades ago, and the “paleoconservative” term itself has faded. In its place, a small rising cohort of self-described postliberals drawing on this school of thought have emerged. This growth parallels that of the Catholic postliberals, who also critique the trajectory of American liberalism, although they differ in claiming that liberalism itself was once normatively good. While for postliberal Catholics liberalism itself is and has always been wrong, for old-right postliberalism, there was at some point a liberalism that was worthy.

From the perspective of current-generation postliberals inspired and influenced by paleoconservatism, it is the politics of the contemporary political establishment—Democrats as well as the flagging institutional cadres of pre-Trump Republicans—in recent decades that has pushed the world decidedly into an era of “after-liberalism.” And this therefore forces the question of what comes next.

University of Florida political scientist Nathan Pinkoski has been especially prominent in making these connections between the old right lineage and the new postliberalism, most recently highlighting the interlocking nexus of state, business, and international regulatory regimes to further curtail individual rights.²¹ He terms this “actually existing postliberalism,” using the term as a descriptor for a critique against society while also adopting the label itself. That is, we live in an era after liberalism, and only self-understood postliberal solutions are possible. Pinkoski is prominent among the rising generation of right-wing academics, having also previously defended Catholic postliberals from smears of “fascism,” and has gestured to the revival of Caesarist thinking (in the sense of decisive, authoritative governance breaking a sclerotic and divided democratic system) in his academic writing as key to thinking about an after-liberalism reality.²²

Meanwhile, other writers, such as the hyperbolic postliberal influencer Auron MacIntyre, rely heavily on the paleoconservative Burnham’s theorizations on managerial domination (understood as a key liberal means of asserting social power without political responsibility) to assign blame for negative changes to culture, society, and governance in the last several decades, and castigates liberal democracy as a pernicious form of quasi-totalitarian oligarchy.²³ Pinkoski has, in fact, reviewed MacIntyre’s work, describing it as a kind of postliberal critique mixed with an old form of liberal-conservatism (that is, paleoconservatism).²⁴ For both, postliberalism suits them as an easy term of utility to describe a new era of old ideas about where American society and politics went wrong.

Characterizing Whole Postliberal Movements

This brings us to a fourth usage of “postliberalism”—as an Anglo-American-specific variant of what scholarship increasingly calls “illiberal” thought, or “illiberalism.” This illiberalism is a generic academic term originally developed to characterize the surprising phenomena of political disruption in post-Communist Eastern and

21 Nathan Pinkoski, “Actually Existing Postliberalism,” *First Things*, November 2024, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2024/11/actually-existing-postliberalism>.

22 Nathan Pinkoski, “Charles de Gaulle and the Revolution of 1962: Caesarism in Search of Republican Order,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 54, no. 1 (January 2025): 25–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2024.2435735>; Nathan Pinkoski, “How Not to Challenge the Integralists,” *Law & Liberty*, Liberty Fund, April 30, 2020, <https://lawliberty.org/how-not-to-challenge-the-integralists/>.

23 Auron MacIntyre, *The Total State: How Liberal Democracies Become Tyrannies* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2024).

24 Nathan Pinkoski, “Safe Passage out of Tyranny?,” *TomKlingenstein.com* (blog), April 1, 2025, <https://tomklingenstein.com/safe-passage-out-of-tyranny/>.

East-Central Europe from the 2000s onward—that is, the reactive politics of cultural conservatism, immigration restrictionism, national sovereignty, civilizational pride, and forthright statism in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, Poland under the Law and Justice party, and now beyond the post-Communist world in Italy under Giorgia Meloni. In this way, we can introduce postliberalism as an academic *conceptual specification of illiberalism*. Here we no longer have postliberalism as self-applied by political thinkers and intellectual entrepreneurs, but as an analytic tool to describe an entire contemporary political phenomenon useful to outside observers.

Postliberalism here is thus nested under the umbrella label of “illiberalism,” which has been used increasingly as a way to conceptually capture substantive policy- and politics-oriented ideological reaction against the perceived experience of hegemonic liberalism, expressed culturally, socially, politically, and economically.²⁵ This phenomenon is usually expressed “with pronounced tendencies towards the distrust of checking or minoritarian political institutions formed by apolitical experts, and focused on promoting a variety of collective, hierarchical, majoritarian, national-level, and/or culturally integrative approaches to contemporary political society.”²⁶ Academics using the “illiberalism” term to describe ideological reaction and its empirical political patterns in East-Central and Eastern Europe are many, with prominent definitions and “best usage” arguments developed by scholars such as Marlene Laruelle, Zsolt Enyedi, and others, alongside a growing cottage industry of handbooks, programs, and conferences in the US, France, Germany, and elsewhere.²⁷

For our purposes, using “postliberalism” in this way usefully describes the American variant of illiberalism, not least because key illiberal actors on the American right now call themselves “postliberal,” refer to the general political paradigm as such, or are otherwise influenced by these ideas. The temporal implication of an after-liberalism also works well in capturing the wide variety of burgeoning heterodox visions for the 21st century, all of which have been energized as an ideologically substantive and politically powerful reaction to perceived establishment liberal hegemony.

As we loosen conceptual specificity in favor of broadness, we can use the illiberal analytic toolkit to connect identifiable political patterns across a wide and disparate field of ideological strains. In this sense, postliberalism therefore serves as an umbrella label in an English-speaking context for anything academics in other disciplines or political commentators might also call “reactionary,” “New Right,” “far-right,” “national-conservative,” “nationalist,” “Christian nationalist,” “dissident

25 For conceptual definitions, see: Julian G. Waller, “Distinctions with a Difference: Illiberalism and Authoritarianism in Scholarly Study,” *Political Studies Review* 22, no. 2 (May 2024): 365–386, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14789299231159253>; Marlene Laruelle, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197639108.001.0001>; Marlene Laruelle, “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction,” *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (June 2022): 303–327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

26 Waller, “Distinctions with a Difference,” 372.

27 See, for example: Laruelle, *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*; Laruelle, “Illiberalism”; Julian G. Waller, “Illiberalism and Authoritarianism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024): 61–94, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197639108.013.1>; Julian G. Waller, “Disentangling Authoritarianism and Illiberalism in the Context of the Global States System,” *Journal of International Affairs* 75, no. 1 (2022): 33–54, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27203118>; Zsolt Enyedi, “Concept and Varieties of Illiberalism,” *Politics and Governance*, September 11, 2024, <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance/article/view/8521>; Anthony Lawrence A. Borja, “Conceptualizing Political Illiberalism: A Long Overdue Index of Illiberal Political Values,” *Philippine Political Science Journal* 43, no. 1 (April 27, 2022): 28–56, <https://doi.org/10.1163/2165025X-bja10027>.

Right,” “futurist,” “tech-accelerationist,” “tech-right,” or “neoreactionary.”²⁸ There are good reasons to use these terms with specificity and care, but there are also good reasons to analytically group them together into a wider familial ecosystem of substantive ideological reaction.

Even as these are distinct strands of thought (and in some cases even mutually-exclusive), all can be usefully characterized as postliberal, taken one rung higher up the ladder of abstraction and helping us focus on general commonalities.²⁹ As postliberalism comes to define this phenomenon of broad-based ideological reaction, we enable a much wider range of ideational toolkits to enter the postliberal semantic field, including many parts of the modern right that would otherwise have little to do with the communitarian, religious, or old-right lineages but all share hostile opposition to establishment, status quo liberalism, and a search for something coming next.

Most notably, a more capacious use of postliberalism would include the Nietzschean vitalists around performance artists like Bronze Age Pervert as well as the Silicon Valley-based tech-right, which includes transhumanist, rationalist, authoritarian libertarian, and AI accelerationist strands.³⁰ None of these should play well with the self-described postliberals highlighted above, yet they occupy a similar reactive space, propose distinct but related critiques of liberalism’s atrophy or failure, support the same general political movement as of the mid-2020s, and help constitute the broader canon of postliberal thought in the US nonetheless.

As of early summer 2025, at least two scholars of the American New Right are finalizing their work on book manuscripts that will provide their own bespoke definitions and characterizations of postliberalism in this academic vein, further adding to the growing pile of scholarly conceptualizations on offer. We can expect this to continue over the rest of the 2020s, with this essay representing only an early, in-progress assessment of the sudden growth in “postliberalism” as a label itself.

It is helpful that the thinkers and intellectuals who call themselves other labels of note are increasingly using the “postliberal” label to refer to themselves—just as the illiberal Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán used “illiberal democracy” to describe his own political tendency in Hungary.³¹ British critics of the contemporary

28 For varied usage and interpretations of these phenomena, see for example: Stefan Borg, “A ‘Natcon Takeover’? The New Right and the Future of American Foreign Policy,” *International Affairs* 100, no. 5 (September 2024): 2233–45, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae178>; Nicholas Michelsen, “Hungary, Populism and the New Right,” *New Perspectives* 32, no. 4 (December 2024): 327–328, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X241296679>; James Pogue, “Inside the New Right, Where Peter Thiel Is Placing His Biggest Bets,” *Vanity Fair*, May 2022, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/04/inside-the-new-right-where-peter-thiel-is-placing-his-biggest-bets>; James M. Patterson, “An Awkward Alliance: Neo-Integralism and National Conservatism,” *Religion & Liberty* 35, nos. 1 & 2 (Winter-Spring 2022), <https://www.acton.org/religion-liberty/volume-35-number-1-2/awkward-alliance-neo-integralism-and-national-conservatism>; Mark Sedgwick, ed., *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

29 Giovanni Sartori, “Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 64, no. 4 (December 1970): 1033–53, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1958356>.

30 Julian G. Waller, “The Illiberal Right Moves Beyond Critique,” *Frontiers of American Reaction* (blog), Illiberalism Studies Program, Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, November 2022, <https://www.illiberalism.org/the-illiberal-right-moves-beyond-critique>; Jasmin Dall’Agnola, “Illiberal Technologies: Linking Tech Companies, Democratic Backsliding, and Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 4, no. 3 (2024): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.53483/XCOS83577>; Josh Vandiver, “Hard Men, Hard Money, Hardening Right: Bitcoin, Peter Thiel, and Schmittian States of Exception,” in *Far-Right Newspeak and the Future of Liberal Democracy*, eds. A. James McAdams and Samuel Piccolo, Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024): 205–230; Josh Vandiver, “Masculinist Identitarians, Strategic Culture, and Eurocentric Geopolitics,” in *Global Identitarianism*, eds. José Pedro Zúquete and Riccardo Marchi, Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023): 175–196.

31 Jacques Rupnik, “Orban’s Hungary: From ‘Illiberal Democracy’ to the Authoritarian Temptation,” in *Contemporary Populists in Power*, ed. Alain Dieckhoff, Christophe Jaffrelot, and Elise Massicard, Sciences Po Series in International Relations and Political Economy, eds. Alain Dieckhoff and Miriam Perier (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022), 133–151, http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-84079-2_8.

Western order, such as Aris Roussinos and Mary Harrington, have similarly used the term both descriptively and self-referentially.³² The highly successful American right-wing moral-cultural activist Christopher Rufo and those who look on his project positively have done so as well.³³ And America's most famous authoritarian theorist and intellectual neoreactionary, Curtis Yarvin, has recently begun using the "postliberal" label to describe the new reactionary politics of America himself.³⁴

Whether these thinkers buy into the specific programs of any of the self-described postliberal groups, they increasingly find themselves using the term "postliberal" as way to describe contemporary right-wing ideological ferment in America overall. Many still prefer other terms—conservative, New Right, or some other niche label. But we are reaching the point where "postliberalism" is no longer a label one necessarily must use to describe oneself, but one which others (friendly or otherwise) will use to capture the general phenomenon and those within it.

This finally leads us to the fifth meaning of "postliberal," which encapsulates all of the above and adds two key ingredients: (1) a mass politics combined with a substantive set of identifiable policy orientations embodied by the 2024 Trump campaign, and (2) the subsequent, post-election reactionary-reformist governing agenda. We can call this the *ideological mass politics of reaction*. Until 2024, use of the term "postliberalism," or the many variations of postliberal critique and developing programs noted above, was confined to circles of intellectuals, scholars, thinkers, influencers, and their expanding readership, primarily online, often in ephemeral discussions on social media or across blogs and Substack accounts.³⁵ With the 2024 election campaign, the relatively high socio-economic and socio-cultural status of the postliberal milieu was then translated by determined activists and through structural developments into a much broader political phenomenon. Postliberalism went from the world of the digital pen to the world of the campaign rally, and ultimately to high elected office.

Indeed, the experience of postliberal ideational diffusion from marginal intellectual corners to wider audiences has been extraordinarily successful in the US. This is not least a function of the internet and social media having removed most barriers of entry to readership and emulation. At the same time, postliberal writers happen to come from societally legitimate professions—the academy, law, theology, and the ascendant and wealthy tech fields. This, in turn, has granted them a certain degree of legitimacy that has separated them from the low-rent controversialists (often termed the "alt-right") of the late 2010s, despite persistent overlaps.³⁶

32 Aris Roussinos, "The Mythic Power of King Charles III," UnHerd (news site), September 11, 2022, <https://unherd.com/2022/09/the-mythic-power-of-king-charles-iii/>; Aris Roussinos, "Ernst Jünger: Our Prophet of Anarchy," UnHerd (news site), December 27, 2021, <https://unherd.com/2021/12/ernst-junger-our-prophet-of-anarchy/>; Mary Harrington, *Feminism against Progress* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2023); Mary Harrington, "Am I Really a Threat to Democracy?," UnHerd (news site), September 6, 2022, <https://unherd.com/2022/09/am-i-really-a-threat-to-democracy/>.

33 Christopher Rufo, *America's Cultural Revolution: How the Radical Left Conquered Everything* (New York: Broadside Books, 2023); Christopher Rufo, "The New Right Activism: A Manifesto for the Counterrevolution," *IM-1776*, January 4, 2024, <https://im1776.com/manifesto-counterrevolution/>; Christopher Rufo, "What Conservatives See in Hungary," *Compact Magazine*, July 28, 2023, <https://compactmag.com/article/what-conservatives-see-in-hungary>.

34 Curtis Yarvin, "Migration and the Sovereign Firm," *Gray Mirror* (blog), Substack, December 28, 2024, <https://graymirror.substack.com/p/migration-and-the-sovereign-firm>.

35 Julian G. Waller, "The Illiberal Right Moves Beyond Critique," Illiberalism Studies Program, *Frontiers of American Reaction* (blog), Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, November 2022, <https://www.illiberalism.org/the-illiberal-right-moves-beyond-critique/>.

36 Jack Thompson and George Hawley, "Does the Alt-Right Still Matter? An Examination of Alt-Right Influence between 2016 and 2018," *Nations and Nationalism* 27, no. 4 (2021): 1165–80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12736>.

Table 1. Varieties of postliberalism

Postliberalism as <i>critical theology and communitarianism</i>	An attempt at recovering religious orthodoxy in an era of secularization and reform in mainline religious traditions in the English-speaking world, with accompanying communitarian social commentary and critique about “neoliberalism”
Postliberalism as <i>political Catholicism</i>	An approach to politics and political action that asserts the necessary and inevitable connection between religion and politics, largely grounded in the Catholic tradition
Postliberalism as the <i>old right lineage</i>	An assessment of 20th-century political history claiming that liberalism itself died with the era of the welfare state, managerial governance, and the end of the sharp distinction between public and private life, often connected to the tradition of the pre-World War II American “Old Right” and modern “paleoconservatism”
Postliberalism as a <i>conceptual specification of illiberalism</i>	An Anglo-American variant of the social science concept of “illiberalism,” used to describe substantive, political- and policy-oriented ideological reaction to perceived hegemonic liberalism as experienced culturally, socially, politically, and economically, this capacious approach captures large varieties of political critique and agitation and is highly contextual to any one country.
Postliberalism as the <i>ideological mass politics of reaction</i>	The current amalgam of all the above currents, characterizations, and intellectual streams, found in the mass politics of the 2020s through the re-election of President Donald Trump and his cohort of supporters, thinkers, and activists promoting a muscular, reactionary-reformist governance model

Postliberalism since 2024 has broken through the blood-brain barrier within the *corpus politicum* in the United States. This is due to two new developments. First, a diverse cadre of rising right-wing elites have been themselves influenced by various postliberal intellectual streams. This is most notably the case for Vice President J. D. Vance, who has referred to himself as a postliberal and is very well read on the entire diverse ecosystem of postliberal thought, from its Catholic postliberal end to Silicon Valley’s burgeoning tech-right.³⁷ But we can find postliberalism in other

37 Ian Ward, “Is There More to J. D. Vance’s MAGA Alliance Than Meets the Eye?,” *Politico*, September 13, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/09/13/jd-vance-new-right-political-movement-00177203>; Rod Dreher, “I Would like to See European Elites Actually Listen to Their People for a Change’: An Interview with J. D. Vance,” *European Conservative*, February 22, 2024, <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/dreher/i-would-like-to-see-european-elites-actually-listen-to-their-people-for-a-change-an-interview-with-j-d-vance/>.

national elites such as Missouri Senator Josh Hawley, who has penned essays in respected right-wing journals on a kind of Protestant, Christian nationalist form of postliberalism.³⁸

The second vector is through the maturation of populist politics, embodied by President Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement. In 2016, MAGA was just a term for Trumpian populism, with all its contradictions and emotions.³⁹ In 2025, MAGA is still populist, filled with contradictions, and politically emotional—but it is recognizably postliberal. The 2024 campaign was built around an ideologically coherent platform of immigration restriction, economic protectionism, aggressive anti-elite bureaucratic reform, and moral-cultural reaction, undergirded by an active set of think-tank institutions, popularizing organizations, and specific plans to learn lessons from the administrative and personnel chaos of Trump's previous stint in office.⁴⁰

Indeed, the modern political expression of postliberalism is found directly in the re-election of President Donald Trump. With his second time in office has come a new cohort of supporters, thinkers, and activists promoting a muscular, reactionary-reformist governance model, who are now far and away more influential than they had been in Trump's previous, much more ideologically incoherent administration.

Postliberalism in Toto

Ultimately, postliberalism shares one set of general traits across its entire ecumene. If we take the word to be more than merely a self-referential term, but to be the English-speaking instantiation of illiberal ideological reaction, then despite core divergences (religious vs. secular, traditional vs. tech-right, democratic vs. more obviously authoritarian, and so on), then every variant of postliberalism always suggests that the world does not have to be this way—that the vulgarized understanding of political scientist Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" is not an end.⁴¹

For nearly all postliberals, discontent with the regime type of liberal democracy (that is, with its perceived unalterable left-progressive and oligarchic decision-making tendencies) is widespread, and asserted to not be the only way one can organize political and social order in the 21st century. All share the reactionary mode of disgust with and disdain for the contemporary cultural and political status quo, looking to the past (from the medieval period to the Founding Fathers to even the FDR or Nixon Administrations) for lessons in future governance.

38 Josh Hawley, "Our Christian Nation," *First Things*, February 1, 2024, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2024/02/our-christian-nation>; Josh Hawley, "Christian Democracy for America," *Compact Magazine*, October 2023, <https://compactmag.com/article/christian-democracy-for-america>. So-called Christian nationalism is a very contested term, and most who use it, either in academic or pejorative senses, do not yet rely on the "postliberal" nomenclature. This is changing, however, and conceptually whatever the term describes can be fit under the broad "illiberalism-postliberalism" label. See for example: Jesse Smith, "Old Wine in New Wineskins: Christian Nationalism, Authoritarianism, and the Problem of Essentialism in Explanations of Religiopolitical Conflict," *Sociological Forum* 39, no. 4 (2024): 328–340, <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.13014>; Jesse Smith and Gary J. Adler Jr., "What Isn't Christian Nationalism? A Call for Conceptual and Empirical Splitting," *Socius* 8 (January 2022): 23780231221124492, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231221124492>; Mike Sabo, "What Is Christian Nationalism?," *The American Mind*, October 2023, <https://americanmind.org/salvo/what-is-christian-nationalism/>; Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2022).

39 Hank Johnston, "The MAGA Movement's Big Umbrella," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (January 2024): 409–433, <https://doi.org/10.17813/1086-671X-28-4-409>; Robert C. Lieberman et al., "The Trump Presidency and American Democracy: A Historical and Comparative Analysis," *Perspectives on Politics* 17, no. 2 (June 2019): 470–479, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592718003286>.

40 Heritage Foundation, "Project 2025: Presidential Transition Project," Heritage Foundation website, accessed April 2, 2025, <https://www.project2025.org/>; Michael Hirsh, "Inside the Next Republican Revolution," *Politico*, September 19, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/09/19/project-2025-trump-reagan-00115811>.

41 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

Furthermore, most forms of postliberalism share an emphasis on the failure of liberalism as a model of society and governance, the importance of the power of the state, the utility of substantive policy action, a willingness to engage in disruptive reformism, and an eye to confronting existing institutions, gutting and depopulating them (and with an eye to subsequently reformatting and repopulating at least some) rather than relying on market forces or bureaucratic goodwill to hope that favored policy goals are achieved.⁴² Although seemingly a paradox, postliberalism per the 2024 campaign was an exercise in ideological reactionary-reformism under a populist guise.

Notably, little of this is fundamentally different from the Eastern and Central European forms of illiberalism, although it is perhaps more radical. Indeed, countries such as Hungary, Poland, or Slovakia have it easier, with old political traditions on the continental political right from which to draw that touch on these ideological themes, including classic forms of national-conservatism and right-wing statism found throughout the 19th century and the Interwar period.⁴³ But for Americans it is very new and jarring, or had otherwise been forgotten amid the generational and political churn of the liberalism-dominant latter 20th century.⁴⁴

And it is exactly this point—the combined reactionary-reformism and the populist energy—that unites all species and types of postliberalism under a single broad, vague, and evolving banner. And it is this same point that informs contemporary right-wing (and yes, even center-right) politics today: the postliberal assertion is that *things do not have to be this way, and concrete steps can be taken to change them*. The 2024 campaign suggested the relevance of postliberalism to the new mass politics of reaction, and its first 100 days in office has only further justified this emphasis.

The Postliberal Election

The 2024 presidential election saw the first postliberal electoral campaign, the first self-described postliberal politician to enter the highest echelons of American elite politics, and the first postliberal presidential policy platform. Although bolstered by and mixed with many other ideological strains, traditional or otherwise, on the American right wing, the color of postliberalism was unmistakable in the Trump-Vance campaign.

These developments are in real distinction with the entry of postliberal thought into the general political sphere eight years prior. American postliberalism, from the perspective of ideological production and intellectual development, found its initial cachet in the wake of Donald Trump's victory in his first presidential campaign, in 2016. A plethora of journals and online publication outlets were founded during the period following his victory, integrated with ongoing social media conversations, primarily on Twitter, that created a sufficiently large ecosystem of written thought.⁴⁵ This was where Catholic postliberalism first found its footing on the American right, when discontented thinkers were discovering or rediscovering paleoconservatism, when the alt-right peaked, and when parts of the Silicon Valley tech-right first

42 Rufo, "The New Right Activism"; MacIntyre, *The Total State*; Gladden Pappin, "Toward a Party of the State," *American Affairs* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 149–160, <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2019/02/toward-a-party-of-the-state/>; Adrian Vermeule, "Integration from within," *American Affairs* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2018), <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2018/02/integration-from-within/>.

43 Mihai Varga and Aron Buzogány, "The Two Faces of the 'Global Right': Revolutionary Conservatives and National-Conservatives," *Critical Sociology* 48, no. 6 (September 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205211057020>.

44 See discussions of the Old Right in Gottfried, *A Paleoconservative Anthology*.

45 Borg, "A 'Natcon Takeover'?" Borg, "In Search of the Common Good"; Gladden Pappin, "Requiem for the Realignment," *American Affairs* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 132–146, <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2023/02/requiem-for-the-realignment/>; Gladden Pappin, "From Conservatism to Postliberalism: The Right after 2020," *American Affairs* 4, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 174–190, <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2020/08/from-conservatism-to-postliberalism-the-right-after-2020/>.

showed real ideational influence. But that is where this body of writing stayed, broadly speaking, cut short from achieving major policy influence.

Before and after

The Trump I Administration was not particularly postliberal in its governing approach. Legislative achievements largely mirrored standard GOP platforms of lowering taxes and pursuing deregulation.⁴⁶ Appointment patterns in the judiciary followed in the same vein, hardly rendering it distinct or different from any other hypothetical Republican president.⁴⁷ It was a Republican administration certainly—and a chaotic one at that—but not ideologically reactionary or radical, let alone coherently so.⁴⁸ Trump's own personalist appeal was far more populist (i.e., simply appealing to the divide between a malign elite and a good people) than anything else.⁴⁹

An elected conservative government governing within the confines of decades of conservative policy orientations does not need a new academic framework to provide new explanatory power.⁵⁰ GOP administrations have been generically, if perhaps more moderately than commonly portrayed, socially conservative, national-patriotic, and bureaucratically skeptical for decades. The most off-the-wall successes of the 2017 to 2021 Trump presidency were the Abraham Accords, which knit together an unexpected period of calm in the Middle East; and criminal justice reform, which decarcerated huge numbers of Americans in an effort far more ideologically in line with progressive reformism than anything else.⁵¹ Trump I was a populist, frenetic, chaotic, and blustering conservative administration at the end of the day. Its illiberal tendencies, while real, were only sometimes evident in actual policy-making, and hardly coordinated.

The primary exception was the president's implacable immigration orientation, which can plausibly be termed illiberal—in the sense of deep reaction against the assumptions and policy regime of America's hegemonic liberal tradition—although one would not have called it postliberal at the time, even as some did make use of the illiberalism framework.⁵² As the pre-Trump immigration consensus was a formal political lack of consensus, de facto favoring executive nonenforcement, which was widely supported by the left-progressive academic and media establishment, Trump's coercive enforcement practices can be best captured as a form of illiberal reaction to a hegemonic status quo assumption. Very late in his term, the president also discovered the power to make cultural-institutional changes in the federal government (e.g., an executive order against diversity, equity, and inclusion [DEI]

46 Laura Ellyn Smith, "Trump and Congress," *Policy Studies* 42, nos. 5–6 (September–November 2021): 528–543, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2021.1955849>.

47 Amanda Hollis-Brusky and Celia Parry, "In the Mold of Justice Scalia: The Contours & Consequences of the Trump Judiciary," *The Forum* 19, no. 1 (July 2021): 117–142, <https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2021-0006>.

48 Amanda Terkel and Igor Bobic, "Trump Is Governing Like a Traditional Republican," *Huffington Post* (news site), April 3, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/donald-trump-is-republican_n_5ac2826be4b04646b6452ca6.

49 Michael Kazin, "Trump and American Populism: Old Whine, New Bottles," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 6 (November/December 2016): 17–24.

50 Kurt Weyland, "Why US Democracy Trumps Populism: Comparative Lessons Reconsidered," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 55, no. 3 (July 2022): 478–483, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521001876>; Lieberman et al., "The Trump Presidency and American Democracy."

51 Fred A. Lazin, "President Donald Trump's Abraham Accords Initiative: Prospects for Israel, the Arab States, and Palestinians," *Politics & Policy* 51, no. 3 (2023): 476–487, <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12533>; Arthur L. Rizer, "Can Conservative Criminal Justice Reform Survive a Rise in Crime?," *Annual Review of Criminology* 6 (January 2023): 65–83, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-criminol-030920-090259>.

52 Jasper Theodor Kauth and Desmond King, "Illiberalism," *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 61, no. 3 (December 2020): 365–405, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975620000181>; Reijer Hendrikse, "Neo-Illiberalism," *Geoforum* 95 (October 2018): 169–172, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.07.002>.

programs inspired by Chris Rufo), but this would last only a very short while before his leaving office.⁵³

Postliberal Developments in 2024

2024 could not have been more different from the earlier years of intellectual postliberalism mixing with the eclectic decisions of the first Trump Administration. After losing in 2020, the former (and future) president ran a vigorous 2024 campaign excoriating the sitting Biden Administration on exactly the grounds of illiberal reaction that we have come to expect from exemplar states in East-Central Europe. This was not only on the questions of immigration and law enforcement that had been a hallmark of the previous administration, nor just the populist cult of personality vis-à-vis a perfidious Washington elite, but across the board: on culture, social policy, and musings on using the administrative power of the state for right-wing goals to both command and destroy the establishment liberal state.⁵⁴

It was not just complaining about cancel culture, but forcibly ending DEI using all institutional levers available. It was not just talking about how Russian President Vladimir Putin or Chinese President Xi Jinping were tough men, it was active disdain for decision-avoiding European allies. It was not just “draining the Swamp,” it was enlisting the world’s wealthiest man, Elon Musk, to spearhead a purge of government officials justified by perceptions of their left-liberalism, their fiscal incontinence, and their bureaucratic laziness all at once.

Even more remarkable, a religious current buzzed through the campaign of a man famously irreligious and vaguely secular, who spoke of religion as a kind of nice, albeit ultimately alien thing to him.⁵⁵ Yet possibly due to the great turning point of the campaign in the death-defying showgrounds of Butler, Pennsylvania, the campaign became infused with a sense of perceived divine legitimacy pushed by the candidate himself. “Ave Maria” played at rallies.⁵⁶ The saintly image of Our Lady of Guadalupe was posted on the candidate’s personal social media site, Truth Social.⁵⁷ And in his Second Inaugural Address, the president would culminate with remarks that he had been chosen by God to lead the country once more.⁵⁸ This was new. This was very certainly *postliberal*.

The 2024 election also saw the catapulting of the first American politician to refer to *himself* as a postliberal from junior Senator (already a high position and emblematic of the vast growth in attractive postliberal thought since the mid-2010s) to the vice-presidential position on a national ticket. Senator J. D. Vance had become the posterchild figure for the diffusion of postliberalism into America’s elite millennial generation cohorts. A meteoric rise from poverty to the Ivy League to the military to venture capitalist finance to national celebrity to the upper chamber of Congress also tracked a growing interest in the huge variety of postliberal thought that was churning on the internet in the 2010s.⁵⁹

53 Hailey Fuchs, “Trump Attack on Diversity Training Has a Quick and Chilling Effect,” *New York Times*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/us/politics/trump-diversity-training-race.html>.

54 Rufo, “The New Right Activism”; Heritage Foundation, “Project 2025: Presidential Transition Project.”

55 See, for example: Joel T. Rose, *Trump versus Bible Verses*, independently published, 2020.

56 Michael Gold, “Trump Bobs His Head to Music for 30 Minutes in Odd Town Hall Detour,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2024, sec. US, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/14/us/politics/trump-town-hall-dj-music.html>.

57 Mary Margaret Olohan, “Trump Celebrates the Birthday of Jesus Christ’s Mother with Image of ‘Our Lady of Guadalupe,’” *Daily Wire* (news site), September 8, 2024, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/trump-celebrates-the-birthday-of-jesus-christs-mother-with-image-of-our-lady-of-guadalupe>; John Grosso, “Reporter’s Inbox: Why Is Trump Tweeting about the Virgin Mary and St. Michael?,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 1, 2024, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/reporters-inbox-why-trump-tweeting-about-virgin-mary-and-st-michael>.

58 Donald J. Trump, “Inaugural Address,” White House website, January 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/>.

59 Daryl McCann, “J. D. Vance and the New Republican Party,” *Quadrant* 68, no. 9 (September 2024): 34–38, <https://doi.org/10.3316/informit.T2024091200005591771747200>.

Vance received confirmation in the Catholic Church in 2019, and would later pen an eloquent essay in the postliberal Catholic journal of arts, *The Lamp*, that made clear his conversion story was pulled along by the same threads that make religious postliberalism so enticing: the lack of meaning in modern, atomized, liberal society; the yearning for “Truth, Beauty, and Goodness”; and the deep desire for being told that another world is possible after all.⁶⁰ And that was all before it became clear that Vance was also reading deeply in the broader postliberal milieu, from integralists and political Catholics to the tech-right and neoreactionaries, among others.⁶¹ Vance embodies the diverse and distinctive ecosystem of postliberal thought, and is unsurprisingly also generationally appropriate, being a millennial fluent in the social-media-based form of ideological production dominant by the 2020s.

Finally, the 2024 election saw the first postliberal policy platform of a major party in modern American history, and the first wide coterie of postliberal advisors, activists, and agitators finding influence in the American policy development ecosystem. The campaign itself was assisted by a growing number of policy wonks and think-tankers who pushed identifiably postliberal lines: economically statist, socio-culturally illiberal. A few examples will suffice here.

The economist Oren Cass and his American Compass think tank drafted major arguments in favor of tariffs, industrial policy, and pro-family-formation policy.⁶² New journals like *American Affairs*, the online magazine *Compact*, and the amorphous domain of tech and “bro” podcasters became key locations for policy discussions and asserting a generic pro-Trump party line (as well as allowing for places where there were obvious coalitional disagreements). The Heritage Foundation think tank, once a bastion of older Republican conservatism, reinvented itself as the hub of MAGA thought in DC and built out a massive wish-list of programmatic goals called Project 2025.⁶³

Project 2025’s policy recommendations were accompanied by an even more ambitious goal, to create a master list of loyal and willing future staffers in a prospective Trump II Administration who would not thwart or undermine the president’s intentions in their positions overseeing the bureaucracy. The series of conferences held by the National Conservatism Conference coordinating organization peaked with a gathering that brought MAGA Republican activists together with postliberal writers and thinkers of many persuasions across the so-called dissident right, as well as representatives from foreign illiberal political systems such as those of Hungary,

60 J. D. Vance, “How I Joined the Resistance,” *The Lamp*, April 1, 2020, <https://thelampmagazine.com/blog/how-i-joined-the-resistance>.

61 Ward, “Is There More to J. D. Vance’s MAGA Alliance Than Meets the Eye?”; Adam Wren, “How Lord of the Rings Shaped J. D. Vance’s Politics,” *Politico*, July 19, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/07/19/lord-of-the-rings-jd-vance-00169372>; Ian Ward, “Is There Something More Radical Than MAGA? J. D. Vance Is Dreaming It,” *Politico*, March 15, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/03/15/mr-maga-goes-to-washington-00147054>; Sohrab Ahmari, “Hillbilly Energy: Newly Announced as Trump’s Running Mate, J. D. Vance Has Become a Powerful Voice in the New American Right,” *New Statesman*, July 15, 2024, <https://www.newstatesman.com/ns-interview/2024/07/hillbilly-energy>; Pogue, “Inside the New Right.”

62 American Compass, “The American Wake-Up Call,” American Compass website, October 24, 2024, <https://americancompass.org/the-american-wake-up-call/>; Mark A. DiPlacido, “Tariffs’ Long-Term Benefits Are Worth Short-Term Costs,” American Compass, March 17, 2025, <https://americancompass.org/tariffs-long-term-benefits-are-worth-short-term-costs/>; Duncan Braid, “‘Great Again’ Is a Promise,” American Compass, November 7, 2024, <https://americancompass.org/great-again-is-a-promise/>.

63 Heritage Foundation, “Project 2025: Presidential Transition Project.”

India, and elsewhere.⁶⁴ This was mimicked through other institutional forums such as CPAC.⁶⁵

Simply put, the 2024 election was qualitatively different from the 2016 election: the first Trump victory had put postliberalism on the map intellectually, while the second completed the integration of postliberal approaches to politics and the actually-existing Trump-era GOP of the day. This can be seen across the surprising collapse of myriad old Republican orthodoxies. Gone were pieties to conservative internationalism or neoconservative interventionism, replaced by retrenchment and reconsiderations of hemispheric empire-building.⁶⁶ Gone too was absolute social conservatism: strict pro-life claims on abortion and in vitro fertilization (IVF) were dropped from the GOP platform at the insistence of the candidate himself, and the general acceptance of right-wing, illiberal homosexuals within the Trumpian political tent became well-established.⁶⁷

Both of these odd-fit examples actually exemplify the postliberal approach writ large, whereby withdrawing from hands-tying commitments made by the liberal order and recognizing that gaining political control—and using it—is deemed more important than losing beautifully and with doctrinaire purity.⁶⁸ But they also represent distinct corners of postliberalism as a phenomenon (international-restraint-oriented nationalists in the former, the tech-right and the pragmatic election campaigners in the latter). Others in the same camp were dismayed (both political Catholics and Protestant Christian nationalists) on social conservative grounds, but this—notably!—did not break apart the coalition. Postliberalism in its American variant, as elsewhere, defies overly restrictive assumptions about *what must be* for its assembling of coalition members. And that brings us to the future.

Postliberal Vistas

The first hundred days of the Trump II Administration represents a series of postliberal policy set pieces, from sharp immigration restrictions to direct offensives against liberal bastions in education and established research communities to new protectionist tariff policies to radical restructurings of the administrative state.

Many of these policy changes reflect the multiple divisions within the postliberal ideological family surrounding the new government. Immigration restrictions, as well as pro-IVF and other family-planning policies, have been castigated by some political Catholics, even as protectionism and moral-cultural issues have been declared distractions by the libertarian-influenced tech-right.⁶⁹ Even before the

64 “‘National Conservatives’ Are Forging a Global Front against Liberalism,” *The Economist*, February 15, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2024/02/15/national-conservatives-are-forging-a-global-front-against-liberalism>.

65 Grant Silverman, “Building the International Right: The American Conservative Union and CPAC,” IERES Occasional Papers, no. 29, Transnational History of the Far Right series, Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, February 18, 2025, <https://www.iliberalism.org/building-the-international-right-the-american-conservative-union-and-cpac/>.

66 Borg, “A ‘Natcon Takeover’?”

67 “Republicans Move at Trump’s Behest to Change How They Will Oppose Abortion,” AP News, July 8, 2024, sec. Politics, <https://apnews.com/article/republicans-abortion-party-platform-trump-rnc-5561e857c5501df9864ab8ca666d8bc5>; Daniel Lefferts, “My Afternoon with the ‘Normal Gay Guys’ Who Voted for Trump,” *GQ*, February 10, 2025, <https://www.gq.com/story/my-afternoon-with-the-normal-gay-guys-who-voted-for-trump>; Brad Polumbo, “Trump’s New GOP Platform Is a Massive Win for LGBT Americans,” *Newsweek*, July 11, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/trumps-new-gop-platform-massive-win-lgbt-americans-opinion-1924048>.

68 Samuel Francis, *Beautiful Losers: Essays on the Failure of American Conservatism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993).

69 Maya Goldman, “Trump Rekindles IVF Debate,” *Axios* (news site), February 19, 2025, <https://www.axios.com/2025/02/19/trump-rekindles-ivf-debate-vitals>; Kimberly Heatherington, “Analysis: Trump’s Proposed Mandate Aims to Fund IVF’s Large-Scale Destruction of Human Embryos,” *Catholic Review*, October 5, 2024, <https://catholicreview.org/analysis-trumps-proposed-mandate-aims-to-fund-ivfs-large-scale-destruction-of-human-embryos/>.

inauguration, fights broke out between vying pro-Trump influencers over the relative importance of visa issues for high-skilled knowledge workers versus a culturally nationalist restrictionism.⁷⁰ There is no dearth of difference across the range of Administration supporters.

Yet all remain united by the core claims of postliberal American thought: it is better to be in power and taking decisive action against the liberal and bureaucratic establishment than to be left outside the camp; it is better to push harder and more radically than to moderate in advance of the onset of policymaking; it is critical to advance an agenda reacting against perceived liberal excesses in the economic structure, the cultural field, and political institutions. Even where disagreements exist, such as between the priorities of moral-cultural conservatives, anti-immigration proponents, and the tech-right, synthesis may yet be found. This has been the case so far with the vice president's public remarks, which have tacked back and forth arguing for implicit policy coherence by way of a fast-paced set of early media and speaking engagements.⁷¹

Looking on to 2025

Not everything is postliberal in first months of the Trump II Administration, but much more has been than was expected in November 2024. The speed at which radical-reactionary policy has been declared and implemented has exceeded even adherents' beliefs in what was possible. Even in foreign policy, the area often least-touched by domestic ideological developments and one in which the bench of identifiably postliberal thinkers and subject-matter experts is clearly most narrow, has seen the postliberal preference for retrenchment and disengagement from perceived liberal imperium show up in full force.

The new Secretary of State Marco Rubio declared the globe to be transitioning to a multipolar world order that the US was uninterested in preventing, while the Administration has pushed hard to end the Russia-Ukraine War on terms of peace as soon as reasonable (rather than the Biden Administration's insistence on a vaguely specified continuation until Russia's ultimate defeat).⁷² Viewing the rejection of establishment liberalism to be a phenomenon that spans America's alliance network, the vice president personally communicated US intolerance for left-liberal policies during his trip to the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, while asserting European countries' role as free-riding clients to be at an end.⁷³ In leaked communications between top Administration officials about intervening against Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping lanes near Yemen, Vance represented what is evolving into the tentative postliberal position of skepticism towards the European Union establishment, coupled with geopolitical retrenchment, even as others in the Administration, not connected to postliberal ideas, took more internationalist lines.⁷⁴

70 Stephen Collinson, "What the Visa Feud Says about the Coming Trump Administration," CNN, December 30, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/12/30/politics/trump-musk-h1b-visa-analysis/index.html>.

71 J. D. Vance, "Remarks by Vice President Vance at American Dynamism Summit," White House website, March 18, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/03/remarks-by-vice-president-vance-at-american-dynamism-summit/>; "What Is 'Ordo Amoris'?" [sic] Vice President J. D. Vance Invokes This Medieval Catholic Concept," AP News, February 6, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/jd-vance-catholic-theology-migration-e868af574fb2e742c6ed3d756c569769>.

72 US Department of State, "Secretary Marco Rubio with Megyn Kelly of The Megyn Kelly Show," Department of State website, January 30, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-marco-rubio-with-megyn-kelly-of-the-megyn-kelly-show/>; Antoinette Radford, "Timeline of How Trump's Pledge to End the War in Ukraine Hit Reality," CNN, March 26, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/26/europe/timeline-trumps-pledge-to-end-ukraine-war/index.html>.

73 Christina Lu, "The Speech That Stunned Europe," *Foreign Policy*, February 18, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/18/vance-speech-munich-full-text-read-transcript-europe/>.

74 Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Trump Administration Accidentally Texted Me Its War Plans," *The Atlantic*, March 24, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2025/03/trump-administration-accidentally-texted-me-its-war-plans/682151/>.

Indeed, this particular text-thread reveal was enlightening as it showed the limits of the full postliberal framing provided above. The governing elites selected by the president for his new cabinet represent a range of positions, from older Republican national-security internationalists to non-ideological Trump loyalists to postliberal critics of the status quo global order. Postliberalism is not the only way to characterize intra-Administration decision-making, but it is certainly a major tendency.

It is beyond this essay's scope to consider the likely future steps of a very dynamic new Administration beyond its first few months. Taking cues from other governments with identifiably illiberal policy orientations and approaches to governance, a continuation of executive-driven hyperactivity is likely, as is a continuation of confrontation with oppositional judicial structures acting as a bulwark of institutional recalcitrance against the executive. Further attempts to restructure the economy along protectionist lines will continue to contour thinking, even when faced with considerable countervailing pressure. Cultural policy will continue to forward "counterrevolutionary" efforts (to use phrasing from the activist Rufo) against university and other educational institutions perceived to be highly ideological.⁷⁵ The shock war on the bureaucratic corps will surely continue, although the personal role of the world's richest man may very well diminish. And a shifting dance between moral-cultural conservatism and tech advances will play out within the broader postliberal coalition within and outside the Administration.

Postliberalism means several things all at once. For some, it is political Catholicism, or perhaps Christian nationalism. For others, it is a critique of modernity citing older traditions of protectionism, cultural nationalism, anti-managerialism, and retrenchment from global (although perhaps not hemispheric) empire. For still others, it is used loosely to describe an anti-status quo position against contemporary establishment liberalism.

For our purposes, it is all these things and more, working as a broad characterization of the general radical-reactionary ideological tenor of the new Administration. Many have yet to take on the "postliberal" label themselves, but this confused and gradual dynamic is exactly how such broad terms are generated and enter the political lexicon. Easy nomenclature heuristics are attractive, and comfort with the term among both the news media and ideological entrepreneurs themselves has expanded considerably since the 2024 election. Where the Administration will go remains to be seen, but postliberalism has certainly not failed in achieving the highest political offices in the US, and it continues to seek expansive political goals today.

⁷⁵ Rufo, "The New Right Activism."