Opinion

NCR Voices



Former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie; former Vice President Mike Pence; and Sen. Tim Scott, R-South Carolina, are pictured in this composite photo. (CNS photos/Courtesy of NBC/William B. Plowman; J. Scott Applewhite, Pool via Reuters; Courtesy of U.S. Senate Photography)



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While most eyes are on the Trump vs. DeSantis battle, other candidates, we'll call them the Lilliputians, are jumping into the race. We'll wait until the autumn to start handicapping these contestants, but no one should dismiss them entirely. When George W. Bush sought the presidency in 2000, people dismissed his candidacy, comparing him unfavorably not just to the other candidates but to his younger brother Jeb. Vermont Gov. Howard Dean was leading the Democratic pack in 2004, until he melted down in Iowa. Barack Obama was in single digits when he entered the 2008 presidential race.

The Palmetto State has two announced candidates: former Gov. Nikki Haley and current Sen. Tim Scott. Trump's Vice President Mike Pence, set to enter the race next week, would be expected to be a front-runner, if things had turned out differently with his former boss. They didn't. Former governor of Arkansas, Asa Hutchinson, is running as the voice of sanity in a party where sanity is no longer a highly valued commodity.

Former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie is expected to announce his candidacy next week. In 2016, he singlehandedly took down the candidacy of Sen. Marco Rubio, mocking the Floridian's robotic debate performance. I will always have a soft spot in my heart for Christie for that takedown, but that doesn't mean he should be president.

In fact, none of these other candidates should become president.

It is easy in the era of Donald Trump to look back wistfully at an earlier Republican Party. We recall that GOP candidates Mitt Romney and John McCain conceded when they lost. We remember that George W. Bush was young and irresponsible when he was young and irresponsible, but like St. Paul counseled, when he became a man, he put away childish ways. And, further back, there is the memory of Ronald Reagan, optimistic, brimming with confidence as only an actor can, sketchy on policy details but someone who knew what he believed. Every Republican presidential candidate in my lifetime was preferable to Trump.

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The other Republican candidates running now, with the possible exception of DeSantis, would be better than Trump. None of them have his baggage, his obsessions, his acute narcissism. (Every presidential candidate has to be at least a little bit of a narcissist.) They all lack his capacity for self-delusion.

These Lilliputian candidates, however, share one characteristic that also defines their relationship to Trump in a critical way. They all subscribe to neoliberal economics that made Trump possible. Reagan was not hateful the way Trump is hateful, but he and his GOP heirs embraced policies that hollowed out the middle class, decimated the working class and denuded the government of the power needed to right the wrongs they perpetrated.

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Income inequality has grown consistently since the Reagan years. This article at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities looks at the data from a variety of angles, but each angle tells the same story: The rich got richer and the poor got poorer. The numbers for wealth inequality are even worse than those for income: "The best survey data show that the share of wealth held by the top 1 percent rose from 30 percent in 1989 to 39 percent in 2016, while the share held by the bottom 90 percent fell from 33 percent to 23 percent," the CBPP article states.

Union membership is half what it was in 1983, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Not coincidentally, the decline in union membership tracks with the increase in income inequality, as this fact sheet from the Economic Policy Institute shows. The best news in the post-pandemic economy is that low-income workers have seen steady gains in both employment and wages, as the pandemic brought back classic Keynesian policies. President Joe Biden needs to be out celebrating that fact every day.

Last week, a friend drove me around Detroit. We looked at some beautiful, historic churches. All around was the fallout from neoliberalism. Vacant buildings interspersed with vacant lots. Boarded up storefronts. Few pedestrians downtown. Reagan accepted the presidential nomination of his party in that city's Cobo Hall in 1980. His shadow still lingers over the city's decline.



A Michigan voter leaves Louis Pasteur Elementary School on midterm election day Nov. 8, 2022 in Detroit. Ronald Reagan accepted the presidential nomination of his party in that city’s Cobo Hall in 1980. His shadow still lingers over the city’s decline, says Michael Sean Winters. (CNS/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)

For every Detroit, there are scores of smaller cities that have also lost their vibrancy. Harvard politics professor Robert Putnam has been cataloging the diminishment of these communities for years, from *Bowling Alone*, to *American Grace*, to *Our Kids*. Those books focus on the citizens and communities that neoliberalism left socio-economically crippled. They are the same citizens and communities whose anxieties Trump figured out how to exploit. Trump's vulgar populism is different from

neoliberalism, but it is dependent on the crushing economic devastation neoliberalism wrought.

So, one cheer, maybe even two, for Republicans who stand up to Trump, who insist the 2020 election was not stolen, who condemn his racist and misogynistic behaviors. But voting for neoliberals does not really help the country move forward or address the solidarity deficit; It only paves the way for other, future populists to degrade our democracy.