'Why the Right Went Wrong': E.J. Dionne shows why the GOP has no incentive to compromise

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By Glenn Altschuler

After Lyndon Johnson routed Barry Goldwater in the presidential election of 1964, pundits predicted that the right wing of the Republican Party had been discredited for good. We now know, of course, that they were mistaken.

In “Why the Right Went Wrong: Conservatism From Goldwater to the Tea Party and Beyond” (Simon & Schuster, $30), E.J. Dionne Jr., a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, syndicated columnist, commentator on NPR and the author of “Why Americans Hate Politics,” provides a sweeping, sophisticated and shrewd analysis of the radicalization of the Republican Party from the defeat of Goldwater to the rise of the Tea Party and the bizarre twists and turns of the GOP’s presidential contest in the fall of 2015.

The ideological homogenization of the party, he reminds us, was a response to the growing racial and ethnic diversity of the United States, the political mobilization of evangelical Christians, widespread frustration with the war in Iraq, the rise of terrorism and the Great Recession of 2008-09. It was facilitated by gerrymandering that created safe seats for Republicans in the House of Representatives and state legislatures, who had little incentive to compromise with Democrats — and the central role in nominating party candidates played by primaries, where zealots tend to turn out and moderates tend to stay home.

A central purpose of “Why the Right Went Wrong” is to identify (and urge a return to) the now all-but-forgotten “modern” Republicanism of Dwight Eisenhower and other like-minded moderates. That Republicanism, Mr. Dionne indicates, prompted Richard Nixon to create the Environmental Protection Agency, index Social Security benefits to inflation and endorse a minimum guaranteed income for poor families. It allowed Ronald Reagan to make compelling arguments for conservatism but leave the underlying structure of the New Deal social safety net “entitlements” essentially unchanged. It persuaded George H.W. Bush to support the Americans With Disabilities Act and go back on his “read my lips,” no-new-taxes pledge. And it characterized the “compassionate conservatism” initiatives (No Child Left Behind, Medicare prescription drug benefits and a path to citizenship for immigrants) of George W. Bush.
Ideological purity, Mr. Dionne maintains, is a losing political strategy for Republicans. To be sure, they may continue to do well in off-year elections, where turnout is low. The demography in the United States, however, indicates that Republicans are not likely to return to the White House. White males, the backbone of the Republican Party, are shrinking as a percentage of the electorate. The number of African-American, Asian-American and Latino voters is growing rapidly — and they are increasingly alienated from the GOP. George W. Bush won about 40 percent of the Latino vote in 2004; Mitt Romney got barely 27 percent eight years later. And young Americans, who constituted an important part of Ronald Reagan’s coalition, tend these days to be social liberals (on, for example, gay marriage) and lean toward the Democrats.

That said, it seems most unlikely that Republican voters or politicians will respond pragmatically by restoring “moderation as a conservative virtue.” As Mr. Dionne suggests, the Grand Old Party is reaping what it has sown. Republicans are angry. They are anti-establishment, anti-government, anti-Obama (many of them believe he is a Muslim socialist, born in Kenya) and xenophobic. According to a recent poll taken by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, more than a third of Republicans (a large percentage of them actively involved in politics) believe that the policies of the Democrats are a threat to the well-being of the nation.

And since so many voters now get their information from partisan “echo chambers,” the ideological chasm that polarizes and paralyzes our politics will probably not be bridged anytime soon.

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