Revue de presse américaine

Ambassade de France aux États-Unis
Service de presse et de communication

Liberté • Égalité • Fraternité
RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE

Vendredi 5 mai 2017, réalisation : Joanna Bosse-Platière

FRANCE - EUROPE

3 takeaways from the French presidential debate – POLITICO

BY Maïa de La Baume

PARIS — French presidential contenders Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen traded blows for more than two hours Wednesday night in a televised debate that — for all its intensity — is unlikely to change anyone's mind four days before the election.

Whether voters chose to abstain or turn out on Sunday, however, will be crucial.

According to most polls, supporters of the conservative candidate François Fillon and far-left contender Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who were knocked out in the first round on April 23, are considering staying home in large numbers.

The resulting equation looks different for each of the finalists, given Macron, the center-left former economy minister, enjoys a comfortable 15 to 20 percentage point lead over Le Pen, the leader of far-right National Front.

Here are the three takeaways from Wednesday's debate.

1. Macron is already in a presidential mood

Macron had to avoid a major blunder that could prove costly, though likely not fatal, in Sunday's runoff. He also had to refrain from appearing testy and defensive, as he did during the two televised debates that preceded the election's first round, which he won with around 24 percent of the vote to her 21.3.

After Wednesday's debate, Macron could claim mission accomplished. Even as Le Pen repeatedly tried to tar him with guilt by association, portraying him as an heir to the policies of unpopular outgoing Socialist President François Hollande, he stayed calm under pressure. However, he at times appeared condescending as he faced Le Pen and her seemingly weak mastery of the main topics.

Macron's aim was to highlight the contrast between his own optimistic vision of what France can achieve versus what he described as Le Pen's "culture of defeat." Her protectionism, he said, was just a sign of a lack of confidence in the country's capacity to deal with challenges.

He also needed to connect emotionally — not just intellectually — with the French citizens who didn't vote for him in the first round: many of the poor, the unemployed, the left-behind and the downtrodden. He insisted that, like Le Pen, he has met and listened to workers who have lost their jobs and are fearful for their future.

"I hear their anger, but without your cynicism," Macron told Le Pen at one point.

By remaining calm throughout — even when going on the attack or accusing Le Pen repeatedly of "talking nonsense" — the 39-year-old Macron projected the air of a man already ensconced in the Élysée, preoccupied with what to do come Monday. It may have helped assuage concerns, notably among conservative voters, that his youth and inexperience don't make him presidential material.

2. Le Pen's smirk tactics fail to charm

Trailing her rival badly in polls just days before the runoff, Le Pen's aim was to discredit Macron and escape the narrative of her own defeat by proving she is ready to be the commander-in-chief. She went on the attack from the start, accusing Macron of being Hollande's political heir — an "investment banker" who wants to turn France into a giant "trading room" where "everything is for sale."

Le Pen focused on trying to knock Macron off-balance, to unsettle him enough to make him lose his cool and look unprepared for the presidency. Smiling, smirking and frequently laughing at Macron's comments, she repeatedly told him not to get "too excited." At one point she urged him to "take a sip of water, you'll feel better."

While Le Pen kept her poise throughout the debate and landed a few good one-liners, she often veered into mockery and bouts of dismissive laughter. Her attention was focused more on attacking her rival than presenting her own plans for reform. Macron used this to his advantage, countering that she had no serious plans for the country but instead thrived off fear and "talking nonsense."

Still, Le Pen rarely appeared totally off-balance. A notable exception: When Macron quizzed her pointedly about her plans to pull France out of the European Union, she had no clear and ready reply.

All in all, Le Pen's existing fans are likely to be comforted in their choice of candidate. It remains to be seen, however, whether undecided voters will be convinced to join her side after the debate.

3. Invisible voters still ignored

The debates' two moderators, barely heard in almost 150 minutes, weren't the only ones invisible in Wednesday night's debate. The majority (55 percent) of French voters who, in the first round, chose neither Macron nor Le Pen had reasons to feel excluded.

Unemployment got only cursory mentions — mostly when the two candidates fought over their respective tax and spending policies — and the social issues dear to the Catholic voters who went for Fillon were largely ignored. At one point, one of the moderators had to beg the duo to talk about education.

The invisibles and their issues may not have been the point of this debate. But since job creation is consistently the top priority for French voters, a real discussion of the best ways to reform the economy seemed sorely lacking.

The monthly CEVIPOF/Ipsos survey published earlier Wednesday detailed the different characteristics of the two candidates' electorates. Women, college graduates, the well-to-do, the under-35s and over-65s and inhabitants of big cities vote for Macron in greater numbers than the national average. Conversely, those more inclined to vote for Le Pen are men, those aged 35 to 65, the unemployed, farmers and those living in the countryside or in small towns.

The televised debate — for all its bluster and length — didn't trigger a major shock to upset those trends.

France Must Say Non to Le Pen

by The Editors More stories by The Editors

The candidates in this Sunday's French presidential election, Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron, are alike in one way: Both stand outside the mainstream parties, promising an end to politics as usual. That's something France's voters appear to want.

Beyond that, however, the differences are stark, and you could sum them up like this: Macron is a safe choice, and Le Pen is downright dangerous.

Her party, the National Front, stands for militant nationalism and extreme xenophobia. Its former leader -- her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen -- famously described the Holocaust as a mere detail of history. His daughter, unfortunately, is a more effective politician. In an effort to detoxify the FN's brand and expand its base, she expelled Le Pen senior from the party in 2015, restyling herself as the candidate who would "protect" France -- from immigrants, rent-seeking elites, job-destroying competition and terrorists.

Her campaign videos are all windswept shorelines, monuments to French glory and appeals to voters to make a "civilizational choice." Even now the rebranding continues. She stepped down as leader of the party the day after the first-round vote, saying she wanted to broaden its appeal. And last week she announced that a respected center-right politician, Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, would be her prime minister if she is elected.

Clear thinking from leading voices in business, economics, politics, foreign affairs, culture, and more.

Beneath the new coat of paint, though, the messages are vintage Le Pen. She rewrites history, denying France's responsibility for the Vel d'Hiv roundup of 13,000

Jews, arrested in 1942 for deportation to Nazi concentration camps. She denounces "Islamists" as threatening the French way of life, and warns of "a totalitarianism which threatens our country." She hailed Donald Trump's election as a harbinger of things to come, "not the end of the world, [but] the end of a world." Actually, Trump seems moderate by comparison.

Le Pen's 144-point election manifesto amounts to an indictment of the post-1945 global order. Her goal is to restore hard borders, the national currency, and state management of swathes of the economy. Immigration would be all but stopped and imports taxed to favor French products. Far from protecting France, these measures would flatten an economy that's already struggling.

In addition, the thinking that underpins them is flatly inconsistent with France's traditional commitment to the European Union. Brexit will be a heavy blow to the EU, but the union can get along without the U.K. The same isn't true for France. A French president as stridently anti-EU as Le Pen would be a mortal threat to the whole European project.

French voters have a lot to be unhappy about. After years of low growth, high unemployment and a scandal-ridden political culture, they're right to feel let down by the main parties, and many see a vote for Le Pen as a protest against an ossified governing establishment. This accounts for her standing in the polls -- at roughly 40 percent, far too high for comfort.

She's the wrong vehicle for this discontent. Electing Macron, a former economy minister with some good ideas on policy, would still send a message that the mainstream parties can't ignore. Electing Le Pen would be reckless in the extreme -- and a setback of historic proportions for both France and Europe.

The French Presidential debate turned boxing match

Robbie Gramer, Emily Tamkin

ours before former U.S. President Barack Obama endorsed Emmanuel Macron, the French presidential candidate faced down opponent Marine Le Pen in a debate full of sharp jabs, hurled insults, and dramatic hand gestures:

"The high priestess of fear is sitting in front of me," Macron said, making the case that Marine Le Pen is just a continuation of her father's racist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic policies. "France and the French deserve better," he said. The 39 year-old former banker pledged to strengthen European ties, reform the country's labor system, and take a harder stance on Russia.

The two candidates for the French presidency sparred Wednesday evening in a televised debate, each making their case to the electorate just days before Sunday's second round of voting.

Le Pen, for her part, tried to tie Macron to François Hollande's wildly unpopular presidency (Macron was Hollande's minister of the economy from 2014 to 2016). Macron slapped back, accusing Le Pen of having no clear economic policies at all. "You propose nothing," he repeatedly said. "You speak only of the past and of others."

France would see a "total collapse" of its industries if the country doesn't close its borders and institute protectionist trade policies, according to Le Pen. "I'm the candidate of that France that we love, who will protect our frontiers, who will protect us from savage globalization," she said.

However, Le Pen appeared much more comfortable when taking her opponent to task on terrorism, the hallmark issue that helped vault her to the front of the presidential race in recent months. She accused Macron of being "complaisant" toward Islamic terrorism. "We have to eradicate the ideology of Islamism from France," she charged at one point. She said, if elected, she would add 50,000 posts to French military and 15,000 police to help combat Islamic radicalism and disband organizations suspected of having extremist roots.

Macron dismissed Le Pen's charges he was soft on terrorism. He pledged to create a Europe-wide fund to combat terrorism, recruit 10,000 new police officers, and extend France's state of emergency first put in place after the November 2015 Paris terror attacks. He also pointed out that Le Pen voted against past European reforms that could bolster security. Combatting terrorism, he said, would be his first priority as president.

He also said that France has to take some responsibility for the radicalization of people who are born and raised in the country — and Le Pen needs to answer for rhetoric dividing the country. "You are playing with anger," he said.

Macron leads Le Pen, a far-right anti-immigrant candidate, by 20 points in the polls ahead of Sunday's election.

At the end of the debate, Le Pen insinuated that Macron held offshore accounts in tax havens. Macron shot back in post-debate interviews Thursday.

"I've never had an account in any tax haven," he told France's Inter radio. "Le Pen is behind this. She has an internet army mobilizing." He added she was spreading "false information and lies" that were "linked to Russian interests" to get a leg up in the final stretch of the race.

Despite Le Pen's heated tirades, French voters thought Macron won the day. A snap poll by Elabe Polling Institute for French television network BFMTV found 63 percent of viewers thought Macron's debate performance was more convincing than Le Pen's.

Macron Vanquishes Le Pen—'The High Priestess of Fear'—in Presidential Debate

Christopher Dickey

PARIS — Barring an act of God or ISIS, or a massive vote for the mysterious Monsieur Blanc, 39-year-old centrist candidate Emmanuel Macron now looks certain to be the next president of France. He emerged from the one and only one-on-one debate against far-right nationalist-socialistic candidate Marine Le Pen on Wednesday night largely unscathed and indeed, according to instant polls, a clear winner.

If he is elected Sunday, the effect on European and global politics could be enormous: a definitive end to what had seemed a wave of nativism and populism sweeping across the West; a huge setback for Russian President Vladimir Putin's designs to divide and weaken European (and American) democracies; and a much tougher, more united European Union position as London tries to negotiate Brexit.

Macron, a wunderkind banker and political neophyte who briefly served as economy minister in the current discredited government of President François Hollande, did not, as some of his supporters feared, fall on his face in the debate, even though Le Pen called him "the prostrate candidate" who grovels before international financial interests.

The heiress to the legacy of the National Front party founded by her irascible race-baiting father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, is anti-immigrant, anti-Islam, anti-euro, anti-European Union, anti-American, pro-Trump, and pro-Putin and would like to close France's borders. A victory for her would turn the post-World War II order upside down—a proposition many frustrated and angry French, especially young ones, have flirted with on the left as well as the right.

Le Pen's strongest suit with many French voters is her position on Islamist terrorism, which she blends with her party's traditional hostility to immigrants, especially those from Muslim countries. Her vow to deport immediately any foreigners suspected (not arrested or convicted) of connection with jihadi groups sounds plausible and tough to a nation that has suffered horrific terror attacks in the last two years.

Macron's policies are hard-line as well, even if less strident. And his riposte in the debate was memorable, calling Le Pen "the high priestess of fear" who would take the country to civil war—which is just what the jihadis want.

Still, it is conceivable a major terrorist attack in the remaining days before the vote might sway the electorate in Le Pen's favor. (One precedent would be the Madrid bombings in 2004, which resulted in a stunning upset for the incumbent Spanish prime minister.)

On questions of economic nationalism, Le Pen repeatedly fell short as Macron, a policy wonk, demanded specifics that she was hard pressed to deliver. Her key pitch to withdraw from the common

currency, for instance, became a muddle of francs and ecus and euros that might have evoked nostalgia in some, but provoked a sense of incompetence and chaos among others.

When Le Pen felt herself stumbling, she tried to goad Macron, laughing at him, shaking her head, and tossing out thinly veiled insults and allusions to his private life. At one point she accused him of "playing student and professor," a smug reference to the fact he married his high-school drama teacher, who is 24 years older than he is. (Yes, there are some amorous anomalies floating around Macron, but this is France: His wife is very attractive, he jokes about his rumored homosexual liaisons—which the Russian press wrote about at length but without substantiation—and few people care.)

Indeed, Le Pen's Trumpian penchant for nastiness, which plays well with her traditional base, served her very poorly in the debate. The French polling service Elabe, questioning more than 1,000 respondents online immediately after the two-and-a-half-hour verbal slugfest, concluded 63 percent thought Macron more convincing, compared with 34 percent for Le Pen.

This roughly parallels what the polls have shown as the likely outcome of Sunday's vote, which Macron has been favored to win by a 60-40 margin. Days earlier, one Macron adviser told The Daily Beast flatly, if privately, "it's decided."

But another member of Macron's team, Laurence Haïm, makes the point that it's not enough for this man with a year-old "movement" called *En Marche!* (Onward), but no organized political party, to defeat Le Pen with 50 percent of the vote plus one vote. "I think the goal for us is to make sure we massively defeat her," Haïm told me after the first round on April 23, when Macron and Le Pen emerged from a field of 11 candidates with only a few percentage points separating them as finalists.

Start and finish your day with the top stories from The Daily Beast.

The French legislative elections are coming in mid-June. Without the momentum of a huge popular mandate, Macron may have big problems drawing enough supporters from the traditional parties of left and right, the Socialists and *Les Républicains*, to cobble together a majority.

And that mandate may be very hard to come by. One recent poll shows that 41 percent of those who voted for Macron in April did so by default. Many supporters of the two candidates who nearly tied for third place in the first round—former center-right Prime Minister François Fillon, a darling of conservative Catholics and moneyed interests who espoused "Thatcherite" economics, and far-left former Trotskyite Jean-Luc Mélenchon—remain bitterly disappointed and intensely hostile to both candidates.

While most see Le Pen as utterly unacceptable—a fascist or, as one snobby Fillon supporter put it, "a fishwife"—they well and truly hate Macron, regarding him as nothing more than a front for the failed and phenomenally unpopular Socialist Party establishment.

As a result, among the almost 20 percent of voters who say they are undecided, many may abstain or drop blank ballot papers into the urns on Sunday, in which case there would be three candidates: Macron, Le Pen, and Monsieur Blanc, as we might call him. The latter might not win, but there remains a slim chance he could tilt the final count in Le Pen's favor.

"It's not a done deal until the deal is done," as Macron spokeswoman Laurence Haïm told me. But in the debate last night, as we'd say in vernacular American, Macron done good.

The New York Times

In France, a Stark Debate and a Stark Choice

The Editorial Board

It was the most brutal French presidential debate anyone could remember, two and a half hours of interruptions, insults, sarcasm and invective between the 48-year-old, far-right populist Marine Le Pen and the 39-year-old, centrist upstart Emmanuel Macron. They called each other liars, arrogant, dangerous and many other things, often paying little heed to the two moderators.

When the dust settled on Wednesday night, Mr. Macron, the acknowledged front-runner in the race, was deemed in political polls to have prevailed. In the calmer moments of the debate, he offered a more detailed and pragmatic set of policy proposals for France's economic ills, and a more coherent vision of France's place in Europe, than Ms. Le Pen's familiar litany of plaints against the European Union, globalization and immigrants.

However the French may feel about its tone, the encounter served to clarify the choice they face in Sunday's vote, the second and last round of the presidential election. After decades of alternating between mainstream candidates of the center-left and center-right, the French this time rejected both in the first round and advanced two relative outsiders who are diametrically, often virulently, opposed on virtually every issue — Europe, terrorism, France's stagnant economy, Russia.

Ms. Le Pen is head of the National Front, an anti-European Union, anti-immigrant far-right coalition her father founded 44 years ago, which she has sought to "de-demonize" since taking charge in 2011 — by, among other things, expelling her father. Mr. Macron is the wunderkind of French politics, a graduate of elite schools, a student of philosophy and an accomplished pianist, who made a quick fortune in investment banking before plunging into politics. Appointed minister of economy under President François Hollande in 2014, Mr. Macron resigned two years later to form a new centrist political movement, En Marche! (or Onward!), to run for the presidency.

Ms. Le Pen wants to close borders, ditch free-trade deals and hold a referendum on European Union membership. She also wants to lift sanctions on Russia and has borrowed funds from Russian banks. Mr. Macron advocates reforms that he says will make France more business-friendly while preserving most of its social safety net. He is pro-Europe, tolerant of immigrants and critical of Russia.

How much either could achieve in a divided country is another question. That would depend in part on the elections to the National Assembly on June 11 and 18, the next political unknown. Nonetheless, the choice for French voters on Sunday is as stark as was Wednesday's debate — and not only for France. A French withdrawal from the European Union would mark a major and potentially fatal blow to the entire European project, and all Western democracies would be hurt by another retreat into narrow nationalism.

Bloomberg

In France's Centrist Vs. Populist Debate, Deja Vu for Americans

by Megan McArdle

Watching last night's presidential debate here in France, I found it hard not to think about our own presidential debates in the U.S., lo these many months ago. In many ways, it was the same: the populist upstart against the center-left representative of the establishment, the status quo against the YOLO, the woman against the man. In other ways, it was very different -- which is why, according to almost everyone, Emmanuel Macron is going to be elected president next week, and Marine Le Pen will not.

Macron, like Hillary Clinton, is the candidate of "more of the same, but with, you know, *more* of the same." His contempt for Le Pen was obvious, and if this were an American debate, would have hurt him. My French is good enough to read a newspaper (very slowly) and to sort of follow the debate as long as no one else was talking. So as I watched, I paid attention to tone and body language as much as content.

What I saw called to mind Chris Arnade's distinction between "front row kids" and "back row kids." Next to Le Pen, Macron literally looked like a kid -- earnest, arrogant, smirking at the stupidity of his elders. Le Pen came off as the earthy aunt who wasn't taking his nonsense. In content, Macron was the clear winner, with a much better grasp of policy detail. But in America, as we just discovered, "commanding grasp of policy detail" was not a winning formula against "tells the front-row kid to put his #%@! hand down and stop showing off."

This Le Pen did, repeatedly. She went on the attack and stayed there. She needled him about his wife (who was his high school drama coach, which would have been a fatal liability in an American candidate). She pummeled him about his connections to the current administration, which is so popular

that the ruling party's candidate drew single-digit support in the first round. She accused him of being soft on terrorism and selling out France to big business.

Macron in turn said that Le Pen's proposals would drive the country toward civil war -- basically, "if you do this, the terrorists will have won." American election-watchers could be forgiven for a certain sense of déjà vu.

Le Pen, like Trump, is basically the candidate of "things were better 40 years ago, so let's go back there." And it's easy to understand why that's appealing for a lot of voters in both France and America. The problem is, even if it were desirable to migrate en masse back to the mid-20th century, no one knows how to do it. France may be struggling to integrate its immigrants, but they are here, and cannot simply be removed the way one might get rid of a piece of furniture that clashes with the rest of the décor. Trade may have resulted in painful deindustrialization, but de-industrialization is a one-way street, and pulling out of those trade relationships will not bring back the lost factories. The euro may have been a very bad idea -- no, strike that, the euro *was* a very bad idea, probably the worst one France has had since "let's get into a land war in Southeast Asia" -- but leaving the euro is not the same as having never adopted it. In the short term, at least, it would be catastrophically messy.

To this, Le Pen's supporters might reply "but at least we could stop making things worse." But even if you hold out more hope for her agenda than I do, the fact remains that if you reject the status quo in favor of radical change, you necessarily raise the risk that things will get much worse. We know approximately what the status quo looks like. Radical action means launching off into the dark. Which is why radical candidates inevitably seem less prepared, knowledgeable and plausible than their mainstream opponents.

That said, compared to Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen sounds like a wonk's wonk. Nor does she have his propensity to lose his cool. Watching the French debate, I was struck by a repeated thought: if Clinton had had Le Pen's speaking ability, she would be president now. During the campaign, and after, Clinton's supporters frequently complained that Clinton was being penalized for being an older woman. But Le Pen is living proof that middle-aged ladies can be effective politicians. I don't like her agenda, and I really don't like her party. But looking strictly at effectiveness on the stump, she's pretty good.

So why, then, is Le Pen trailing so badly in the polls?

For one thing, because she has a better opponent than Trump did. I found Macron's performance lackluster in the first half of the debate, but then, I am not a French voter, so my reactions are not very relevant. And around about the time that they got to talking about Europe, Macron seemed to settle down. He stopped smirking and started looking commanding, passionate, knowledgeable. Le Pen, by contrast, seemed to lose her cool a bit. And the less he smirked, the more effective he was when he pointed out that Le Pen's program was light on convincing detail. The snap poll right after the debate showed that a clear majority felt Macron had won.

Of course, Clinton also had such snap polls and … hello, President Trump. What's the difference?

It seems unlikely that Macron will be hit by anything like the Comey letter between now and Sunday. So that helps. But so, too, does the fact that he is not running in the American system.

First-past-the-post, winner-take-all systems like ours tend to produce two major political parties that trade off power between them. Disruptive candidates therefore have to gain control of one of those two parties. But France doesn't have that system; it has lots of parties in the first round, and then the two with the greatest vote totals advance to a runoff. This means that, as in America, a candidate with a minority of the overall vote can end up in the general election. But unlike in America, they do not necessarily arrive there with a major party's support behind them.

When Trump won the GOP primary, the Republican establishment was aghast, but still had to reckon with him. Out of party loyalty -- and fear of what his voters might do to them in the next primary -- Republican politicians offered some political support, however tepid, anguished and tenuous, for his candidacy. Republican voters, hoping for at least some of the traditional goodies they got out of the presidency (like, say, conservative Supreme Court justices), proved willing to hold their noses and vote for him. In France, by contrast, François Fillon, the center-right candidate immediately endorsed Macron over Le Pen.

Clear thinking from leading voices in business, economics, politics, foreign affairs, culture, and more.

Some of his voters will undoubtedly cast their ballot for Le Pen anyway. And voters on both right and left may cast a "vote blanc" -- essentially, none of the above. Or just stay home. As we rode the metro to watch the debate, my friend was seated next to a supporter of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the far-left candidate who commanded almost 20 percent in the first round. She was on her cell phone, and according to my friend, was trying to persuade the person on the other end that they had to come out to vote for Macron in the second round. Nonetheless, Macron's margins look safer than either Trump or Brexit's "Remain" campaign did at this stage of the proceedings. The consensus seems to be that in France at least, for now at least, the center will hold.

The New York Times

Marine Le Pen's Verbal 'Violence' in French Debate Shocks Observers

Adam Nossiter

"I was myself surprised, as she revealed herself as what is worst about the far right in France," Gérard Grunberg, a veteran political scientist at the Institut d'Études Politiques, known as Sciences-Po, said in an interview.

Even her own father, the National Front patriarch and founder Jean-Marie Le Pen, declared that she "wasn't up to it" during the two-and-half-hour debate, though he still supports her. A poll taken immediately after for BFMTV found that 63 percent of viewers thought that Mr. Macron had carried the day.

His polling lead in the election Sunday is around 20 points, yet it was not clear that the debate would necessarily sway those who had already made up their minds or backed other candidates in the first round of the election. Significantly, however, many observers saw in Ms. Le Pen's principal debate tactic an unwelcome guest: the big lie.

Mr. Macron repeatedly called her a liar during the debate, and newspaper commentaries on Thursday backed him up. "Marine Le Pen: The Strategy of the Lie," was the banner headline on Le Monde's front page, which went on to say that the "deliberate tactic was largely inspired by what Donald Trump practiced in the American campaign."

The newspaper detailed "The 19 lies of Marine Le Pen" during the debate about topics including "Brexit," the euro, the European Union and terrorism. On all these subjects, the newspaper demonstrated that Ms. Le Pen had put forward half-truths and outright falsehoods.

She was revealed as "the heir of a practice of politics that has always been based on denigration and threat," Le Monde said in its front-page editorial. "The imitator, besides, of Donald Trump, piling on, just like the American president, lying insinuation."

The Macron camp was quick to pick up on the negative parallel between President Trump and Ms. Le Pen, posting a video on Twitter in which Americans and Britons express regret about voting for Mr. Trump and for Brexit, and warning that "this Sunday, France will have to make a choice; the worst is not impossible."

Ms. Le Pen has significantly backed away from her early enthusiastic declarations in favor of Mr. Trump since his chaotic beginnings. Meanwhile, former President Barack Obama announced on Thursday he was supporting Mr. Macron, in a video posted on Mr. Macron's Twitter feed.

One "insinuation" from Ms. Le Pen in the Wednesday debate may wind up costing her. At the end, she suggested that Mr. Macron might have "an offshore account," later acknowledging she had no proof.

Such an accusation is extremely serious for public figures in France, especially in the court of public opinion. The Paris prosecutor has opened an investigation into whether fake news is being used to influence the election, and Mr. Macron has announced a lawsuit against right-wing websites over the suggestion.

Ms. Le Pen's tactics on Wednesday, eschewing any kind of detailed exposition of policies and instead relying on epithet-slinging — Mr. Macron was "the privileged child of the system and the elites," and the "representative of subjugated France" — would have been familiar to anyone attending her rallies across France this election season. Her supporters roar at these verbal sallies.

But such language is not normally part of mainstream political discourse in France. And that fact set up the collision of Wednesday night, and the tone of dismay and shock in the commentaries.

The second-round presidential debate has become almost a sacred

ritual in French politics. Fifteen years ago, Jacques Chirac, the former president, refused to dignify Ms. Le Pen's father in a debate when he unexpectedly made the second round. That Ms. Le Pen was not given that treatment in 2017, commentators suggested, meant that she had been accepted as a legitimate partner in the democratic process.

But on Thursday, French news media and academic commentators suggested she had violated that trust by her "violence," as many put it. "Maybe she wanted to reassure her electorate," Marc Lazar, a historian, said in an interview, "or maybe she was just showing her true nature."

"She has wanted to show that she has 'undemonized' the party," Mr. Lazar continued, referring to the effort Ms. Le Pen has undertaken to distance the National Front from the hate-filled declarations of her father. "But in the end, she just proved that she is her father's daughter. I think there were a lot of people who were surprised, because they thought she had really changed."

Even veteran Front-watchers were taken aback by Ms. Le Pen's actions on Wednesday night. "It was transformed into a fight, not a debate," said Valérie Igounet, the leading historian of the National Front.

Numerous political figures said the debate had made a big voter turnout for Mr. Macron all the more urgent. It was not expected to come from the far left, which continues to evince extreme hostility to Mr. Macron, seeing him as the hated representative of capitalism and finance — precisely Ms. Le Pen's depiction of him.

The far-left leader, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, has suggested that there is an equivalence between the two candidates. Some two-thirds of his voters will cast blank votes or abstain, according to an internal party survey.

On Thursday, one of Mr. Mélenchon's more prominent supporters, the filmmaker François Ruffin, wrote in an op-ed in Le Monde addressed to Mr. Macron in the wake of the debate: "You are detested already, before even having set foot in the Élysée," referring to the presidential residence.

More typical of Thursday's reactions, though, was that of an editorial in the southern La Dépêche du Midi, in Toulouse: "The 'decisive' debate was above all a revelatory debate. Through lies and incessant interruptions, striking proof was given last night that it is difficult, if not impossible, to debate with the far right, in conditions of minimal democratic respect."

NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

Marine Le Pen & Gay Support

As France picks its next president on Sunday, National Front nominee Marine Le Pen, 48, enjoys significant support among an unlikely population: gay voters.

According to a survey released Wednesday by Hornet, a gay social network, among 5,224 respondents, 36.5 percent back Le Pen, while 63.5 percent favor former Socialist-party member and reputed centrist Emmanuel Macron, 39. Among Hornet's younger subscribers, 43.5 percent of 18-to-29-year-olds want Le Pen, as do fully 49 percent of those age 25.

While Le Pen surely would appreciate even higher numbers, pundits are surprised that the so-called far-right candidate does this well with typically left-leaning voters. Two factors may explain this phenomenon: Le Pen's previously hostile party now welcomes gays, and militant-Islamic attacks inside and outside of France have ushered gays into Le Pen's largely open arms.

Le Pen's support is just 20 percent among French gays aged 50-plus, Hornet reports. They are old enough to remember the National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen, 88, the father of today's presidential nominee. Excoriated as an anti-Semite and Holocaust denier, Le Pen the Elder advocated quarantining AIDS patients in the 1980s. He called homosexuality a "biological and social anomaly" and also declared: "There are no queens in the National Front."

After Marine Le Pen wrested control of the party from Jean-Marie in 2011, her approach basically has been, *This is not my father's National Front*. She booted her dad from the party in 2015 and, after one of his recent outbursts, she told the newspaper *Le Parisien*, "My father was kicked out of the National Front. He does whatever he wants. It doesn't concern me anymore. . . . I don't talk to him, and I'm not responsible for him or his inadmissible remarks."

Marine Le Pen's process of "un-demonization" of the National Front has included denouncing anti-Semitism, appealing to Jewish voters, avoiding mass protests against gay marriage (although her party's platform promises to scrap it), and choosing gay men Florian Philippot as her chief deputy and Sébastien Chenu as her leading adviser. The party's higher-profile activists include retired gay fashion models Matthieu Chartraire and Bruno Clavet.

"Marine Le Pen's National Front has more top aides who are publicly known to be gay than any other French political party," the Associated Press concluded last month. Asked about these openly gay men in his daughter's inner circle, Jean-Marie Le Pen replied: "Homosexuals are like salt in soup: If there is none at all it is a bit bland. If there is too much, it is undrinkable."

Marine's efforts to defy her dad and create a kinder, gentler National Front has boosted the party's stature among gay voters. In April 2012's presidential election, 26 percent of gay Parisians voted for Marine Le Pen, versus just 16 percent of their heterosexual counterparts who did so. A third of gays who married after same-sex nuptials were legalized in 2013 reportedly voted for National Front contenders in 2015's regional contests.

Many of these "homonationalists," as they have been dubbed, applaud Le Pen's straight talk about Islamic fundamentalism's existential challenge to French lives and lifestyles. In light of the November 2015 ISIS terror attacks that killed 130 in Paris, Tunisian immigrant Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel's truck rampage that murdered 86 pedestrians in Nice last July 14, a suspected terrorist's deadly shootings of police on the Champs-Élyseés last month, and other acts of Muslim-extremist bloodshed, Le Pen said, "Islamism is a monstrous totalitarian ideology that has declared war on our nation, on reason, on civilization."

"This war is being waged without pity and without respite," she continued. "The response must be total across the entire country.#…#I call for the awakening of our people's ancient soul, capable of opposing a bloodthirsty barbarism."

"In France, we respect women. We don't beat them. We don't ask them to hide themselves behind a veil as if they were impure," she told a campaign rally last month. "We drink wine when we want. We can criticize religion and speak freely."

Le Pen also wants to renew border checks and eject foreigners who are on France's terror-watch list. (Far from "far right," these steps are common sense.)

"Where are the gays most in danger? In Islamic countries," a Parisian named Pascale told the BBC in April. "Gay people are being crucified. It's a danger, and I don't want it coming to France, definitely not."

Too late.

Violent Muslim-extremist homophobia has battered France for years.

• Bertrand Delanoë is an openly gay Socialist-party leader. While serving as mayor of Paris, Delanoë was stabbed in the stomach by Azedine Berkane, a devout Muslim and son of Algerian immigrants, at Paris's City Hall in October 2002. Delanoë survived after two weeks in the hospital.

Jean-Claude Dauvel of Paris's prosecutor's office told journalists that Berkane "explained his strong religious views made him reject homosexuality as unnatural."

"He was a bit like us," one of Berkane's neighbors told *Le Monde*. "We're all homophobic, because it's not natural."

Berkane was detained in a psychiatric hospital, but doctors discharged him as non-threatening. In April 2007, he missed a follow-on medical appointment and has been AWOL ever since.

• "Up until 2005, Bordeaux was a very gay-friendly city," Patrick McCarthy told Britain's *The Spectator*. "Same-sex couples could openly walk down the street holding hands without any problems," the Bordeaux resident continued. "However, in the space of two months, five gay men were murdered in the city. The blame was put on Bordeaux's Muslim community, since some of these hate crimes were carried out by people of Arabic origins."

• Dutch librarian Wilfred de Bruijn lives and works in Paris. In April 2013, he and his boyfriend, Olivier Couderc, strolled arm in arm after dinner in Paris's 19th *arrondissement*, where Muslims and North African immigrants abound.

"Hey, look. They're gays," Couderc recalled hearing before attackers pounced. They kicked de Bruijn in the face, delivered five cranial fractures, cut him deeply, knocked out a tooth, and left both men unconscious.

Three men of North African heritage paid for this carnage in June 2014. K. Taieb and M. Abdel Malik, both 19, earned two-and-a-half-year prison terms. T. Kide, 21, received six months' probation for watching this brutality and doing nothing. An unnamed fourth thug was handled in juvenile court.

• Last August 26, officials expelled Redouane Dahbi and Ayyub Sadki, a pair of Moroccans, "given the serious threat posed to public order by maintaining these two radicalized individuals on French soil," the Interior Ministry stated. France's *Le Figaro* reported that the ISIS supporters targeted the town of Metz, where "Dahbi had planned to strike a restaurant downtown and a nightclub frequented by homosexuals, The Place, modeled on the attack against a gay club in Orlando," namely Pulse, where ISIS sympathizer Omar Mateen fatally shot 49 patrons last June.

Many 'homonationalists' applaud Le Pen's straight talk about Islamic fundamentalism.

After the Orlando atrocity, Marine Le Pen observed "how much homosexuality is attacked in countries that live under the Islamist jackboot."

Le Pen remains the underdog on Sunday's ballot. If she manages a Trump-like upset, it may be thanks to voters like Kelvin Hopper, 25, a gay artist and Le Pen supporter in Paris. Hopper told the AP: "Faced with the current threats, particularly from radical Islam, gays have realized they'll be the first victims of these barbarians, and only Marine is proposing radical solutions."

The New York Times

Marine Le Pen's Canny Use of Gender in Her Campaign

Susan Chira

PARIS — Marine Le Pen is showing a little leg.

Thigh, actually, in a new campaign poster of her in a short skirt that encapsulates her calculated, canny use of gender in her uphill campaign for the French presidency.

Though she usually wears pantsuits, her aides were quick to spin the image as a blow against Islamic fundamentalism, championing women's rights to dress as they choose.

The feminization of Marine Le Pen in the current campaign is a tactical shift, but an important one. The poster is part of a broader strategy to draw more female voters and soften the image of a party long treated as a pariah in France. The poster also showed her deliberate appropriation of feminism in the service of her party's Islamophobic message.

Before now, Ms. Le Pen has mainly transcended the barriers that hobble many other Frenchwomen in politics, somehow managing to be both woman and genderless at the same time.

Her father helped install her as party leader, pushing aside male rivals, while many other French female politicians have struggled for advancement within their own parties. So many voters focused on her ideology — her party's virulent anti-immigrant, anti-Europe and past anti-Semitic stances — that her gender seemed secondary.

"She's been around so long that it's a little bit like Hillary Clinton — we forget that she's a woman," said Eugénie Bastié, a contributor to the conservative Le Figaro newspaper.

Less so this time around. Ms. Le Pen's strategists are determined to remind voters that she is, indeed, a woman. A slickly produced video shows her as a strong Everywoman — mother, lawyer and patriot of France (whose symbol, Marianne, is a woman). They have made her Marine, to distance her from a tainted family name.

A four-page brochure laid out like a women's magazine includes pictures of her holding one of her three children and calls her "a woman of heart and conviction." She is quoted in the brochure as saying that "women can better perceive injustice" and that women are more inclined to "defense of the weakest."

Christian Delporte, a professor at the University of Versailles-Saint Quentin who specializes in political communication, said that while in the past Ms. Le Pen emphasized her identity as a working woman, the constant refrains about women and motherhood in this campaign helped sanitize the party's image, to a degree.

"What struck me is that even journalists started to refer to her as Marine, not Marine Le Pen," he said. "It's a strategy being a reassuring woman. She made us forget that on the big themes, like immigration, she hasn't changed."

Yet, at the same time, the party's aggressive policies and her own confident, plain-spoken demeanor convey an authority French female politicians say is often denied to them.

At a rally on May Day in the Paris suburb of Villepinte, Ms. Le Pen showed how she can campaign both as a strong, almost masculine figure, and as a woman. She wielded a deft political stiletto, taunting her opponent, Emmanuel Macron, as a weak, long-winded and out-of-touch elitist.

But she also skillfully stoked patriotic themes, promising a better future for the children of France and leading the flag-waving crowd in an a cappella rendition of "La Marseillaise." As Sandrine Rousseau, a Green Party legislator, pointed out, Ms. Le Pen's speaking voice is deep, overcoming what Ms. Rousseau says is a frequent criticism of female politicians as shrill.

On Wednesday night, during a televised debate, Mr. Macron repeatedly dismissed her ideas as "stupidities," but she struck back with equal force, skewering him as soft on terror and a heartless capitalist. It was another example of how Ms. Le Pen bends the usual gender dynamics — her own feisty presence precluded any sense that a man was being condescending or bullying toward a woman.

Romain Lamiot, a 28-year-old longtime National Front supporter who carried his baby in his arms to the Villepinte rally, admiringly called her "punchy," using a term not usually applied to women in French. "She has authority, directness," he said. "She goes in the sea with the fishermen and can drink a beer with the farmers."

"I think men should be men and women, women," said Evelyne Marin, a 53-year-old teacher at the rally. "She's a strong woman, but very feminine. Unhappily, we don't have a man who can be her equal."

Many French female politicians denounce her strategy as opportunistic, given that neither Ms. Le Pen nor her party has emphasized women's rights in the past.

"For me, Marine Le Pen claiming to be waving the flag of women is a fraud," said Valérie Pécresse, who served as budget minister in the right-leaning government of Nicolas Sarkozy and is now the president of the Île-de-France region. "It's not called feminism, it's called nepotism."

The National Front platform planks on women call for equal pay, but largely focus on two major longstanding party priorities: encouraging larger families through a variety of government subsidies and protecting women's freedoms against what is portrayed as oppressive Islamic customs like the veil.

Ms. Le Pen has softened her previous stance on abortion, now saying it should be legal but used only as a last resort. She denounces but is a member of the European Parliament, where of 59 proposals advancing women's rights put forward over 13 years she voted in favor of just three.

Outside her own party, Ms. Le Pen has few female allies rallying to her in solidarity. "She is not defending or promoting women, she is promoting one woman only, herself," said Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet, who was also a minister in the Sarkozy government.

She and Ms. Bastié say they believe that Ms. Le Pen has succeeded in part because the appeal of French traditional feminism of the left may be ebbing. "We are looking for a new feminism," Ms. Kosciusko-Morizet said. "And Marine Le Pen has gotten inside this crevice, this lack inside the French political system."

Indeed, parity for women is rare across French society, despite a law obliging political parties to nominate an equal number of men and women as candidates. Just 27 percent of legislators in the National Assembly and 25 percent in the Senate are women. Half of university students are women, but just 15.6 percent are university presidents. Women represent half the audience for radio and 8 percent of radio hosts. There are two women presidents in France's equivalent of the Fortune 500, and not one chief executive.

Ms. Pécresse, president of the Île-de-France, has had to make her own slow way up the ladder of French politics, and she said the journey was arduous. Even after 12 years of paying her dues, she said, men in her own party were reluctant to allow her to run for the prestigious post she just won.

She, Ms. Koscuisko-Morizet and Ms. Rousseau described French politics as an unapologetically macho game.

Men simply have easier access to the male-dominated formal and informal political networks so important to winning votes and being chosen to run for local office.

Overt harassment abounds. Ms. Rousseau was one of more than a dozen women who accused a Green Party legislator, Denis Baupin, of forcing himself on them; in her case, he pushed her up against a wall and kissed her against her will. Another regional legislator gave her the traditional French double kiss and pat on the back in greeting — and undid her bra.

In two widely publicized incidents, a female minister wore a flowery dress to testify in Parliament and faced catcalls to take it off; and a legislator started clucking like a chicken when one of his female colleagues began to speak.

And then there are the more subtle barriers, ones that confront American female politicians as well. "When newspapers write a story about a woman in politics, they write about the way she dresses," Ms. Rousseau said. "Of course after one has written that, we cannot be a political leader, manage millions of euros, make war … " Once again, Ms. Le Pen turned that political vulnerability upside down.

Perhaps France's most famous woman, one that the National Front celebrates every May Day, is Joan of Arc. "And we don't all want to end up burned at the stake," Ms. Koscuisko-Morizet said.

Whatever the ironies, and even if Ms. Le Pen falls short, as the polls suggest, political analysts here say that her gender strategy is one of the reasons the National Front has gained ground — although she has long worked at repositioning the party, expelling her father and playing down its anti-Semitic past.

An analysis of the National Front results in 2012 by Nonna Mayer, a sociologist at Sciences Po university and specialist on right-wing French parties, showed that Ms. Le Pen had virtually eliminated a longstanding gender gap, attracting as many women voters as men. She drew strong support from women in low-paid, low-skilled service jobs like cashiers.

"She is proud of being a mother of three children, living out of wedlock, she has divorced twice," Ms. Mayer said. "She gives the image of a modern working woman who does politics."

The New York Times

In French Elections, Alt-Right Messages and Memes Don't Translate

Mark Scott

Their efforts have fallen flat in France, with memes often written in English and extremist photos and images that do not resonate with the French electorate. American-style fake news and other digital misinformation have also failed to gain traction in France, where its own domestic issues and ways of campaigning still dominate.

The muted response in France could portend a similar response by voters in Britain and Germany when they head to the polls later this year in their own national elections.

"There has been an effort to spread fake news, but not to the same extent as what we saw in the U.S. campaign," said Tommaso Venturini, a researcher at the médialab of Sciences Po Paris. "So far, it's hard to see any evidence of the impact of fake news on the potential outcome."

While international activists have found it difficult to break into the French political discourse, local campaigners, often from the country's own far right, have had more success.

Ms. Le Pen's social media team has fought a guerrilla-style war to spread its message online, including a dedicated group that shares videos and photos online that attack her political foes. A loose network of Facebook and Twitter users has similarly backed her campaign while disparaging Emmanuel Macron, Ms. Le Pen's opponent and the front-runner to be France's next president. Many of these social media messages have been shared by the supporters of more traditional politicians, including those of François Fillon, a right-wing candidate who finished third in last month's first-round election.

While muted, American-style fake news has also made an appearance.

Ahead of last month's vote, for instance, a fake news site masquerading as Le Soir, a Belgian newspaper, tried to spread rumors that Saudi Arabia was financing Mr. Macron's campaign. Marion Marechal-Le Pen, a niece of Ms. Le Pen, posted the piece on Twitter before quickly removing the link after local media outlets debunked the claim.

Still, for many in France, such outright fake news stories have been met merely with Gallic shrugs. And the digital tactics of international campaigners have been even less effective.

In part, that is because alt-right activists from the United States and beyond have copied the movement's American extremist images and language without tweaking them to entice the French electorate.

After the anonymous internet user called on others on 4Chan, an online message board favored by the alt-right, to start a "Total Meme War" to help Ms. Le Pen, he warned against mimicking American-style attacks. Yet international supporters repeatedly used Pepe the Frog, a cartoon tied to anti-Semitism and racism that has become an unofficial mascot of the alt-right movement. Many did so without realizing the amphibian is often used as a slur against French people.

In the last two weeks, far-right activists have created multiple memes attacking Mr. Macron — complete with captions and hashtags written in English. Ahead of this weekend's election, some of these images on Facebook and Twitter portrayed Mr. Macron as a 21st century equivalent to Marie Antoinette, the out-of-touch last queen of France, while others linked him with false allegations of an extramarital affair.

But such moves have barely registered with French-speaking Twitter users, particularly local nationalists who already bristle at English overtaking French as the world's most popular language. Almost two-thirds of Twitter messages using the hashtag MFGA — or Make France Great Again — have originated from the United States, according to David Chavalarias, a French academic, who created a digital tool to analyze more than 80 million Twitter messages about the French election.

"Tweets written in English don't have much impact," said Mr. Chavalarias, who conducted the social media analysis for The Times. "But if they are posted with photos, then that can have more of an impact."

The online campaigns have also failed to go viral because they have not been picked up by larger media outlets, a fundamental part of the playbook in spreading these messages in the United States.

American news organizations like Breitbart News, the far-right media outlet that supported Mr. Trump's presidential campaign and whose executive chairman, Stephen K. Bannon, is now a senior White House official, helped to share messages with a wider audience in the United States. But in France, no outlet has similarly embraced the international alt-right during the recent election.

"These trolls are trying to make a difference globally," said Whitney Phillips, an assistant professor at the Mercer University who has studied the rise of the far right online in the United States. "But their inability to do so shows how limited of an impact they are actually having."

the Atlantic

Obama Endorses Macron for French Presidency

Yasmeen Serhan

Former U.S. President Obama announced Thursday he is supporting Emmanuel Macron for the French presidency, noting that though he did not plan to get involved in many elections after his presidency, "the success of France matters to the entire world."

The endorsement comes three days ahead France's presidential runoff Sunday: Macron, the independent centrist who won the first round on April 23, is up against Marine Le Pen, the far-right leader, who finished second. Polls suggest Macron will win by a wide margin, though abstention could affect the outcome.

Obama said Macron "stood for liberal values" and "put forward a vision for the important role that France plays in Europe and around the world," adding in an apparent reference to Le Pen that Macron, 39, "appeals to people's hopes and not their fears."

As Emily Schultheis noted in *The Atlantic* last month, Obama and Macron's campaigns share plenty of similarities. Like Obama, Macron relied on a large and seemingly unprecedented grassroots campaign composed of thousands of volunteers across the country. Both leaders's campaigns were centered on moving their countries in a

progressive direction—Macron's slogan being *En Marche*, or "Onward!," while Obama relied on the slogans "Change We Can Believe In" and, for his reelection campaign, "Forward."

It's an association that Macron's campaign has embraced. Last month, *En Marche* released a video of the former president wishing their candidate "good luck" ahead of election's first round of voting, during which Macron said he looked forward to discuss how to "work together" in the future.

Though it's highly unusual for U.S. presidents to endorse other countries's candidates in their elections, Obama isn't the only one who has voiced his opinion on the French presidential contest. When a terrorist attack hit Paris just days ahead of the election's first round, President Trump took to Twitter to predict that the incident would "have a big effect on presidential election!" and told the Associated Press that while he would not endorse any candidate, he believed that "whoever is the toughest on radical Islamic terrorism and whoever is the toughest at the borders will do well at the election"—an apparent reference to Le Pen, who shares some of the same ideology as Trump's advisers.

It's unclear if Obama's endorsement of Macron will affect French voters. His popularity in Europe and the U.S. notwithstanding, his apparent support of the "Remain" campaign during the Brexit vote, as well his endorsement of Hillary Clinton in the U.S. presidential election, did not have the desired impact. Obama has also said he'd vote for German Chancellor Angela Merkel if he could. She's up for re-election in the fall.

The man who is 'not Le Pen' – and would be president of France

The Christian Science Monitor

May 4, 2017 Paris—The love story of Emmanuel Macron and his wife Brigitte, who is 24 years his senior, has long generated gossip. But it's not the French presidential candidate's first unconventional relationship.

It was the singular bond he shared with his late maternal grandmother, Germaine Nogues, who he called Manette, where observers see the first inkling of a person who would live unconstrained by convention, who would show a willingness and even a need to be different and undaunted – ultimately poising him to win the French presidency on Sunday.

Intellectually exacting, his grandmother wasn't the type "to bake cookies," as his biographer puts it. Instead, as a young boy he spent long hours reading aloud excerpts of Molière and Georges Duhamel with her. Their relationship grew so strong that his own mother wondered if her mother was stealing the young Emmanuel away from their nuclear family.

These are themes that reappear in the candidate's life – loyalty, determination, and perhaps above all, a need to be free to choose his own path.

Aged 39 and virtually unknown the last time the French elected a president, Macron would be the youngest leader in modern French history. And in a country deeply attached to pomp and political tradition, he launched an upstart centrist party a year ago, claiming allegiance to neither the left nor right. Today he's 18 points ahead of Marine Le Pen for the runoff May 7, according to the latest Cevipof poll, despite minimal political experience.

Ms. Le Pen seeks to paint Macron as an elitist insider who, far from the revolutionary he claims to be, is just a continuation of the status quo. Indeed, the former investment banker – seen almost as a political prince, often called France's or even Europe's John F. Kennedy – embodies so much of what populists are rejecting today. But rather than soften his position on key populist bête noires like the European Union, he has embraced them – his May 1 rally in Paris was a sea of EU flags waving aside French ones. Europeans from the outside see in him the newest champion of the EU – and possibly the last defense for a bloc that could crumble under a Le Pen victory.

In an electoral cycle of political upsets – ultimately bringing two outsiders with opposing visions for the future of France to round two – Mr. Macron promises to shake up a country desperately in need of it. But can a man, who has been buoyed as much by luck as intellect and savvy, have the fortitude to bring France forward with the tough reforms it needs?

Hope for France?

Looking back through his life, many says he's been willing to fight against established norms since age 5.

"He is sort of the perfect product of what we call the 'French system,' " says Anne Fulda, a French journalist who authored the recent biography, "Emmanuel Macron: Un Jeune Homme Si Parfait" (A Young Man So Perfect). "But in politics he dared to do this very crazy thing, deciding to run for president when nobody knows you.… It's a way to act against the system."

This is far from the first unexpected choice he's made, she says, pointing at his marriage. "When ... you choose a wife that is so much older, when you choose difficulty, it's a way to be different. At the same time when he chose to have this special link with his grandmother, it's a way to be different too. I think he was like that from the beginning."

On May 1, Macron and Le Pen led huge rallies around Paris. In the suburb of Villepinte, Le Pen, the anti-immigrant, anti-EU candidate of the National Front, warned supporters that Macron would put globalism ahead of French interests. "On May 7, I ask you all to stand tall against finance, arrogance, and the rain of money," she told the crowd.

Her message has drawn not just the far-right fringe but the so-called "left behind," and has resonated in a deeply pessimistic country where the sitting president is the most unpopular in history. A 2016 Ipsos global poll showed the French the gloomiest of all countries surveyed, with 88 percent of respondents saying the country was headed in the "wrong direction."

Macron has forged ahead with a message of renewal, promising to upend the current economic paralysis and help the French get beyond the fear of labor reform, which he says will boost everybody. "The French have hope and optimism, that's why they put us in the lead," he said at his rally Monday, referring to his first-round victory. "The second thing, and it's just as important, is that the French are angry," adding, "we need to hear them as well."

At the event hall, filled with dance music and illuminated by skylights, Martial Sanglard, a nightclub singer, says Macron to him is like JFK. "I'm a socialist, but I support Macron as the only one who offers hope for France," he says. "He is the youthful candidate we need."

Isabelle Potier, a pharmacist at the rally who says she comes more from the right, says she is confident that he'll be able to turn his words into policy despite a short record in governing behind him. "Look at what he's been able to put together in a year, from nothing."

'Talented, and lucky'

Macron was the economic minister under President François Hollande when he left to start his own movement "En Marche." Alain Minc, a business consultant and Macron's mentor, says when he first met Macron 15 years ago and asked him what he wanted to do, Macron told him he wanted to be president of France.

But last year when Macron shared with Mr. Minc his plans to run for president now, Minc says he urged Macron to hold off until 2022. "I told him not to go too quickly," Minc says. "His answer was fascinating. He said, 'You are describing the world of yesterday. Now it doesn't work that way,' and he was right. He understood the political world is moving very quickly."

Macron studied at the elite Ecole National d'Administration (ENA). He later worked at the finance ministry before leaving for Rothschild Bank. He returned to government in 2012 as an adviser to President Hollande, and was later tapped as economy minister. He resigned last summer and officially launched his campaign in November – an audacious gamble that succeeded in part because of the implosion of the mainstream parties in the race.

"I told him recently, you have a contract with God, I never met someone so lucky," Minc says. "But he was talented, and lucky. That's exactly what Napoleon requested from his generals: talent and luck."

Macron grew up comfortably in the provincial city of Amiens, the son of two doctors. He says in his book "Revolution" that he lived his childhood a bit in "another world," largely "through texts and words," which his grandmother helped foster. For years he aspired to be a novelist. He was the perfect child: a prize-winning pianist, at the top of his class. He also loved drama, which is how he met his future wife Brigitte Trogneux.

Their relationship began when she was his high school drama teacher, and her daughter Laurence was in Macron's class. The two got to know one another through a play they wrote together. Brigitte, who at the time was a married mother of three, has been quoted as saying of the time: "I had the feeling I was working with Mozart." She has said she always saw Macron as a contemporary, that she couldn't see the age difference everyone else saw.

While Macron's parents initially hoped the passion would cool, especially after he moved to Paris to finish his studies, the two stayed together, marrying in 2007. She told Paris Match magazine in an interview: "At the age of 17, Emmanuel said to me, 'Whatever you do, I will marry you!' " The only member of Macron's family who at the time approved of the relationship? Grandmother Manette, says Ms. Fulda.

Macron talks about his unusual family on the campaign trail today, including having seven grandchildren who call him "daddy," using the English word. But he says that doesn't mean there is less love in his family – part of an inclusive message he espouses on everything from the economy to Europe to same-sex marriage. He also uses his family situation to sell himself as an asset today: that he fights established norms, and wins.

A pessimistic electorate

Not everyone buys his left-right brand. His critics say he is short on substance and purposely vague about his centrist platforms. Le Pen zinged him during a televised debate in March: "Mr. Macron you have an amazing talent, you've spoken for seven minutes and I'm unable to summarize your thinking. You've said nothing!" she said.

Despite a start-up campaign that has been embraced by young people, more voters ages 18 to 24 supported Le Pen and far-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon than they did the youthful Macron – one indication of the battle ahead to win hearts. Many say they will vote on May 7 not for Macron, but against Le Pen.

Jean-Yves Camus, an expert on the extreme right in Europe at the Fondation Jean-Jaurès, says that the level of hatred toward the system in France cannot be underestimated, a risk for any future president.

"There is really a possibility that if Macron is elected and doesn't really bring something new, something strong especially with regard to the economy but also with the way the political system works, we certainty will have a very difficult time," he says. "If he only appeals to start-uppers, young educated people, winners of globalization, those in the professions and so on, he will not remain for five years."

An exchange that went viral last year already shows the challenges he'll face convincing the working class. In small-town France, the fluent English speaker who advocates for more French entrepreneurism was confronted by a T-shirt clad protester goading him about his fancy suits. "The best way to buy yourself a suit is to work," Macron shot back – a comment which critics say showed how disconnected he is from the life of ordinary French.

Macron seems at pains to emphasize that he is an outsider who was not born with a silver spoon. "My grandparents were a teacher, railway worker, social worker, and bridges and roadways engineer," he writes in Revolution. "All came from modest backgrounds."

He's made some missteps curating that image, including a lavish celebratory dinner after his round-one victory April 23 that was widely panned.

Kind or hard?

The question of likeability also hangs over Macron, despite a dazzling smile and piercing gaze that makes individuals feel on the campaign trail that he's speaking directly to them. A schoolmate from L'ENA told Fulda, for example, that he wasn't always natural. "He was very pleasant, smiling, and shaking hands with everyone, but there was something, they felt, there was something fake, in fact," Fulda says. "His wife says something, she says he doesn't need anyone, and that no one can come into his perimeter."

And yet, almost paradoxically, Fulda sees a strong desire to be liked – what she considers his biggest liability as president. "Perhaps it's his strong desire to be always loved," she says. "If you want to please everyone you cannot do a lot of reforms."

Minc disagrees. "He looks kind, he smiles," he says. But "he will be brutal, cynical, not a mild king, but a strong one."

He says he's seen a change in just over a week – after he was confronted in Amiens last week by Le Pen, who ambushed his visit to a Whirlpool factory set to close down. He stood in front of the workers, and told them Le Pen was lying to them. "He did something very important. When people are accused of being elite, the best countermeasure is to make sure you are physically bold."

Ultimately he says Macron is like a cat. "You throw him through the window and at the end he falls on his feet," Minc says.

The nation – and the world – is hoping France lands on its feet too after May 7.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

French Open Probe Into Suspected Attempt to Tar Emmanuel Macron

Matthew Dalton

PARIS—French prosecutors opened a probe Thursday into a suspected attempt to tar French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron after anonymous files ricocheted across the internet suggesting he had created a shell company on the Caribbean island of Nevis, where officials said they have no record of any such entity.

Just days before Sunday's presidential vote, PDF files anonymously posted on a far-right internet discussion forum Wednesday showed what it said were corporate records of a company named La Providence LLC purportedly created by Mr. Macron in Nevis, a noted offshore tax haven. La Providence is the name of Mr. Macron's high school in Amiens, his hometown in northern France.

Mr. Macron on Thursday vigorously denied that he had created any such company and filed a complaint with the Paris prosecutor's office, which responded by opening a probe into suspected electoral manipulation and distribution of false information.

"We must never let untruths, attacks and destabilization go unchallenged, above all at the end of the campaign," Mr. Macron said on French television.

A Nevis-based executive one of the files mentioned as a representative of La Providence has had no connection to any company with that name or its purported owner, according to the executive's employer, international corporate-services firm Dixcart.

"We believe this appears to be fake news," said Graham Sutcliffe, managing director of Dixcart in Nevis.

The diffusion of the rumor about Mr. Macron appeared to follow a playbook increasingly familiar to Western officials: A network of far-right activists using the internet to distribute unsubstantiated or false information about politicians opposed to their positions. Mr. Macron has been targeted before, Western officials say, because he supports the European Union, hews to a tough line against Russia and has resisted calls to crack down on immigration.

Internet giants such as Facebook Inc., Google parent Alphabet Inc. and other companies have launched programs to detect false information and prevent it from spreading on the internet. In the past, however, such programs have allowed contested material to circulate for weeks or months before being removed.

By filing a complaint, Mr. Macron spurred an investigation that will examine who created the files and how they spread, as well as whether the assertion that he created an offshore company is true, a French judicial official said.

The Financial Services Regulatory Commission of Nevis has no record that a company named La Providence has ever been registered in the tiny Caribbean island, Ercil Dore, a corporate registration officer with the commission, told The Wall Street Journal in a telephone interview.

The commission would have a record of the company "even if it were dissolved or transferred to another jurisdiction," Ms. Dore said.

Mr. Macron's rival, far-right nationalist Marine Le Pen, amplified the issue hours after the files surfaced online, speculating in a televised debate on Wednesday evening that Mr. Macron might have an offshore bank account in the Bahamas. Mr. Macron didn't respond during the debate, but later denied that he had such a bank account.

Two hours before the debate began, two files were uploaded by an anonymous poster to 4chan.org/pol/, an online discussion group favored by far-right activists in the U.S. and Europe.

"Here's where his money is stored. See what you can do with this, anon," the poster wrote, using a Latvian flag for his icon. "Let's get grinding. If we can get #MacronCacheCash trending in France for the debates tonight, it might discourage French voters from voting Macron."

One of the files purported to be an incorporation document for La Providence signed by Mr. Macron. The other was presented as a fax between a man named Richard Palmer on behalf of La Providence and FirstCaribbean International Bank, based in the Cayman Islands. The phone number given for Mr. Palmer led to the Nevis office of Dixcart, which suggested the documents were fake.

Soon, mostly far-right Twitter accounts were posting links to the documents. The first to do so was Fashy Haircut, an account with 14,700 followers linked to a white-nationalist group, according to an investigation published Thursday by Mr. Macron's campaign. Within minutes, the campaign said, dozens of Russia-linked accounts were tweeting links to the files, continuing up to the start of the debate.

On Thursday morning, journalists asked Louis Aliot, vice president of the National Front and Ms. Le Pen's companion, whether he had any evidence to back up Ms. Le Pen's speculation about an account held by Mr. Macron in the Bahamas. Mr. Aliot alluded to the documents circulating on the internet, which didn't mention any account in the Bahamas.

"I don't know, there is an American site today that's discussing a tax evasion by Mr. Macron," Mr. Aliot said on French radio. "We'll see what that is."

Appearing on French television Thursday, Ms. Le Pen defended her speculations in the previous evening's debate about Mr. Macron and the Bahamas.

"I asked him the question," she said. "If I had proof, I would have presented it yesterday. I asked the question."

Bloomberg

Don't Expect a Big Macron Bounce in France

@pegobry More stories by Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry

Markets bounced on Macron's first-round victory and are likely to do so again on Monday if, as expected, he is declared the new French president. But investors should not expect a Macron presidency to pay off in terms of strong economic growth in France.

The first hurdle Macron will face is putting together a parliamentary majority. Under the Fifth Republic's constitution, the president is popularly elected, and this legitimacy makes him a key political actor. But actual policy is carried out by the prime minister and the cabinet, which is accountable to the National Assembly, the lower house of Parliament, which is due to be elected in a June vote. Without a majority in the National Assembly, the president, while not quite a figurehead, finds his powers in domestic policy seriously curtailed.

There is reason to believe Macron will not have this majority. His young party, En Marche! might be an adequate vehicle to winning a media-driven national election, but parliamentary elections are also local affairs. En Marche! hasn't even selected candidates for most constituencies, whereas candidates from rival parties have been campaigning at the local level for months, and in each constituency they have offices, staff, volunteers and party elected officials who carry weight at the local level.

Macron will almost certainly try to work out a deal with one or another of the main parties, either the center-left Socialist Party or the center-right Republican Party, but this will limit his options in terms of policy-making. Or the National Assembly may end up being hung, in which case Macron would have to appoint a cabinet that could be subject to a vote of no-confidence at any time, and would have to cobble together ad hoc majorities, a daunting prospect for any bill that is controversial, as Macron's promised structural reforms would be.

Even if Macron finds a way to have a majority that gives him the most sweeping version of the powers the French constitution invests in the office of the presidency that is no reason to believe he will implement reforms to deliver economic growth. France's sluggish economic growth is due to both demand-side and supply-side constraints. On the demand side, Macron has said he would abide by European deficit and debt targets, winning plaudits and endorsements in Berlin, but making it difficult that any sort of meaningful stimulus package can be adopted.

On the supply side, while Macron talks a good game about the need for reform, his proposed reforms deviate little from the status quo. He proposes to shave 60 billion euros ($65 billion) off government spending over the life of the next parliament, including 15 billion from health care reimbursements, which is sure to be controversial. He proposes modest cuts to payroll taxes, financed by a raise in the social security tax on income known as CSG. The most ambitious plank is bringing the corporate tax rate to 25 percent from 33 percent. In fact, according to a recent government report, while large businesses pay an effective corporate tax rate of 22 percent, small and medium-size businesses pay closer to 30 percent. A broad-based corporate income tax cut should therefore help medium-size businesses, which provide most of the job growth and fuel a lot of innovation.

His agenda has scant words to say about the main supply-side hurdles in France, which are barriers to entry to protected professions and sectors, such as retail, pharmaceuticals and other health-care professions, as well as legal professions, and environmental red tape. In terms of research and development, a key supply-side driver of growth, his main proposal is to merge universities and institutes so they can reach world-class "critical mass," a policy that has already been in effect for 15 years and has shown no appreciable gain in research quality or impact.

Clear thinking from leading voices in business, economics, politics, foreign affairs, culture, and more.

Macron seems to aspire to modest tweaks, cuts and giveaways that keep business happy while funding a technocratic welfare state. In that sense, he is emulating Britain's Tony Blair. But while Blair had a good economic record, for there to be a Blair, there had to be a Margaret Thatcher to sweep away cartels holding back the British economy, and France has not had its Thatcher. Macron is the darling of the markets for now, but he could disappoint them later.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The French Illusions That Die Hard

Sohrab Ahmari

A representative of the globalist elite faces a tribune of globalization's victims. That's the superficial read on Sunday's presidential runoff between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen in France. The deeper question is whether French voters accommodate themselves to reality or cling tighter to their economic illusions. Plenty of clues about which path France might take were on display during the May Day holiday.

Start with the France of illusions. An estimated 40,000 red-clad activists snaked their way from the Place de la République to the Place de la Nation in the early afternoon. Hammer-and-sickle flags abounded. So did portraits of beloved mass murderers like Che Guevara. Gangs of masked youth set off firecrackers that boomed like gunshots.

One placard showed Ms. Le Pen and Mr. Macron side by side, asking: "Plague or Cholera?" A typical slogan was "Neither nation nor boss!"—a double rejection of Ms. Le Pen's nationalism and Mr. Macron's free-market liberalism. These sum up the views of supporters of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leftist firebrand who was eliminated, barely, in the first round last month.

The Mélenchonists have a great deal in common with Ms. Le Pen's National Front, which held its own angry rally earlier in the day. Both camps would lower the retirement age to 60 from 62. Ms. Le Pen would keep the 35-hour workweek while Mr. Mélenchon would shorten it to 32 hours. Both would boost welfare spending and sever or strain the country's trade ties in various ways.

The Le Pen-Mélenchon Venn diagram has a large overlapping set, because both camps blame everyone but the French for the country's malaise.

"The French try to erase historical experience," Pascal Bruckner tells me. The literary journalist is one of a very few classical liberals among French public intellectuals. He says his compatriots "have forgotten the experience of 1989 and only see the bad aspects of capitalism and liberal democracy."

The tragedy of France, Mr. Bruckner says, is that the country never had a Margaret Thatcher or Gerhard Schröder to implement a dramatic pro-growth program. Incremental, haphazard changes have only prolonged the crisis. "So if you're unemployed it must be because of the market economy."

Yet it wasn't shadowy globalists who in 1999 imposed a 35-hour workweek to make overtime labor prohibitively expensive. The law was meant to encourage firms to hire more workers, but like most efforts to subjugate markets to politics, it ended up doing more harm than good. Now it's the main barrier to hiring in a country where the unemployment rate is stuck north of 10%.

Nor was it global markets that levied a corporate tax rate of 33% (plus surcharges for larger firms), a top personal rate of 45%, and a wealth tax and other "social fees" that repelled investors and forced the country's best and brightest to seek refuge in places like London, New York and Silicon Valley.

Nor did globalization build a behemoth French bureaucracy that crowds out the private economy. As of January, this has created a 98% public-debt-to-GDP ratio.

Perhaps the strangest aspect of the recrudescence of collectivist politics in France is the willingness of some American conservatives to indulge it. Yes, Ms. Le Pen and Mr. Mélenchon are intemperate and authoritarian, the thinking goes, but they give voice to real frustrations with globalization and other market evils like gentrification and automation.

If vituperation alone conferred political credibility, Louis Farrakhan would be the most credible figure in American politics. What U.S. conservatives tempted by Ms. Le Pen don't notice is that much of her rage against globalization is the same old conspiratorial anti-Americanism dressed up for a new age of anxiety. It's telling, too, that you never read about the 35-hour workweek in their accounts, which tend to make France sound more like America during the robber-baron era than a stultifying welfare state.

And what would happen to the unprotected if Ms. Le Pen became president? Within a year the country would become a European Venezuela, warns Mr. Bruckner. With her protectionist threats, "nobody would invest in France. Banks would close. People would withdraw their money and go abroad."

Which brings us to the other France. It was also on display on May Day, when supporters of Mr. Macron turned out in droves to hear him speak at a convention center in northeast Paris. They were diverse, mostly young, well-dressed and well-behaved. The watchwords were opportunity, growth, aspiration, competitiveness and—yes—liberty.

Whether a President Macron turns out to be the reformer France needs remains to be seen. His platform is if anything too modest, and he has a tendency to speak to both sides of every issue. But give Mr. Macron and his supporters this: They don't peddle dangerous illusions.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

In French Election, Youth Reject Establishment in Search for Jobs Cure

Matthew Dalton

PARIS—Imane Laribi is like many young people in France: fresh out of school, struggling to start a career, and discontent with the choices before her in Sunday's presidential election.

Facing a tough labor market, she and other young voters led the country's revolt against its political establishment in the first-round of the election. Voters age 18 to 24 overwhelmingly supported candidates coming from outside France's mainstream political parties: the far-left Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Marine Le Pen of the far-right National Front and Emmanuel Macron, a centrist who founded his own party last year.

Ahead of Sunday's final-round vote, polls show Mr. Macron consolidating the support of most young people behind him, garnering about 60% of the 18-to-24-year-old vote. That backing, however, masks deep skepticism among young people over his plans to address their most vexing challenge: landing a steady job.

Ms. Laribi, 22, doesn't like Ms. Le Pen and her hard-edge stances against immigration and the European Union. But Ms. Laribi is uncomfortable casting a vote for Mr. Macron, the pro-Europe candidate, because she doesn't trust his background as an investment banker at Rothschild & Cie.

"We all know the reputation of bankers," said Ms. Laribi, a recent business-school graduate, "It's complicated for young people now across France. I hope not, but I think he's going to sink us."

She voted for Mr. Mélenchon in the first round, but with little enthusiasm. "I voted for him by default," Ms. Laribi says.

Because people under 35 are less likely to go to the polls, their exact impact on Sunday's vote is difficult to estimate.

Mr. Mélenchon's supporters are another wild card in Sunday's runoff: 44% of them are expected to vote for Mr. Macron, 23% for Ms. Le Pen but 33% won't say who they will pick, according to a poll this week by public opinion firm Elabe.

On the campaign trail, Mr. Macron has proposed relaxing France's strict labor-market rules to fight unemployment. He has promised to go further than a meek overhaul passed last year—over violent youth protests while he was economy minister—that made it somewhat easier to hire and fire workers. His plans for an even deeper revamp are likely to face more resistance.

"I don't understand how people can vote for him after that," said Julien Breton, a 19-year-old who voted for Mr. Mélenchon in the first round. "I think the laws should be changed, but not like that."

Other young people say Mr. Macron's free-market experience will make him a more effective reformer.

Clementine Dillard, a 24-year-old biology graduate student, cited Mr. Macron's investment-banking career as a "strong point," adding: "He perhaps knows more about the economy than the others."

The unemployment rate among people younger than 25 stands at 24%, up from 18% before the financial crisis in 2008. Across the Rhine, the German youth unemployment rate is just 7%.

Joblessness remains elevated for somewhat older French workers: The unemployment rate for those ages 25 to 29 is 14% compared with an overall rate of 10%.

Mr. Macron is seeking to address what many economists say is the main cause of the country's youth unemployment. Its labor market is plagued by a sharp division between workers on indefinite contracts that contain strong legal protections against being fired and people on temporary contracts that last for as little as a few weeks.

If young people find work, it is increasingly through these temporary contracts. That makes it hard for them to qualify for loans or rent apartments.

"The integration of youth into the workforce has deteriorated over a number of years," says Bruno Ducoudré, a labor-market economist at Sciences Po, a political-sciences university in Paris. "It's taking longer and longer to find a nontemporary work contract."

Mr. Macron has proposed a suite of measures to alleviate the problem, including financial penalties for businesses that hire too many workers on temporary contracts and new training programs to prepare young people for the workforce.

But economists caution that such programs will have only limited effects without stronger economic growth overall to create jobs for young and old.

"We finish our studies, and we know that it's not easy to find a job, even if we have lots of degrees," Ms. Laribi says, standing outside an employment office in the north of Paris. "I want to open my own company, but it's really difficult."

Ms. Le Pen has attracted a strong following among young people outside of France's big urban centers, another sign of the sharp geographical divide that is shaping French politics. In Flixecourt, a town in France's economically struggling north, French youth are voting overwhelmingly for Ms. Le Pen.

The message of leaving the EU, stopping immigration and imposing tariffs at the French border resonates strongly here. National Front, Ms. Le Pen's party, argues that closing France's borders would protect young and older workers from low-wage immigrant labor and manufacturers in Eastern Europe.

"We have to change the system," said Romain Hemery, 25, "Strangers are coming to France, taking our work."

Mr. Hemery, a carpenter, was let go from his job a few years and is now working for his father, who is also a carpenter.

"We have degrees and still nothing," he says.

The Washington Post

UNE - How Merkel's efforts to save Europe may lead to its undoing

https://www.facebook.com/anthony.faiola

BERLIN — At a recent rally in the French city of Lille, presidential hopeful and right-wing nationalist Marine Le Pen took aim at one

person she has repeatedly slammed on her improbable road to Sunday's runoff vote.

"We do not want the migrants of Madame Merkel," Le Pen said, accenting the foreignness of the chancellor's name to loud applause.

"Don't you think Madame Merkel is toxic for Europe?" Le Pen added two days later in an interview with the BBC. "She let 1.5 million migrants in. Isn't that toxic? She imposes austerity on all the nations of Europe. Isn't that toxic?"

In Europe, Le Pen's barrage highlights a rallying cry going up in elections and populist movements from Britain to Germany, France and Italy:

Since the election of Donald Trump, some have dubbed the stoic German chancellor the new leader of the free world. Blazing a humanitarian trail, she opened the door to war-weary refugees. Her even-tempered diplomacy kept a lid on the crisis in Ukraine. Her insistence on tough fiscal love pulled near-bankrupt Greece — and Europe — back from the financial brink more than once.

At least, that's one narrative.

The other is the one making the rounds on campaign trails and at protest rallies across the continent, where Merkel is emerging as a symbol of everything that is wrong with the German-dominated European Union. Amid a string of major European elections this year — including Merkel's bid for a fourth term in September — Europe's decider has also become its divider.

Her initial policy of welcoming asylum seekers, critics charge, brought foreign faces not just to Germany but to big cities and small towns and across Europe — setting up the challenging task of integrating hundreds of thousands of mostly Muslim newcomers.

Her contentious stance on austerity and balanced budgets across the bloc, meanwhile, came as she led economically strong Germany to the zenith of its post-World War II power, partly on the back of a trade surplus with its neighbors. Many other E.U. nations, meanwhile, have been hogtied from combating high - unemployment and stagnation through economic stimulus.

The German stamp on the E.U. emerged as a rallying cry against the bloc during Britain's vote last year to leave. Now, Merkel's critics insist, her policies are at least partly responsible for giving a lift across the continent to nationalist populists such as Le Pen who may seek to unravel the E.U.

"The politics of Angela Merkel and [her finance minister] Wolfgang Schäuble up to this point have contributed significantly to the deepening crises in the E.U.," Merkel's foreign minister from the rival Social Democratic Party, Sigmar Gabriel, wrote on his party's website.

He added, "A result of this has been the strengthening of anti-European populist parties."

In France, Le Pen's attacks have lent an anti-German bent to her National Front's Euroskepticism, exposing the historical rifts that have led some in France to chafe against the rise of German influence under Merkel.

At the same time, Le Pen supporters increasingly see Merkel as the essence of the globalized, multicultural society that they are seeking to reject.

"We cannot accept the threat of Madame Merkel to our country, to our national identity," said Davy Rodriguez, 23, a deputy of a National Front youth organization in Paris and a student at Sciences Po in the capital, one of France's elite universities.

"They're putting migrants all over the countryside," said Rodriguez, who conceded that his parents were immigrants from Spain and Portugal who arrived in France in the 1980s. "We have to take back our sovereignty."

Merkel as lightning rod is hardly new — for years, the Greeks were hauling out Merkel-as-Adolf-Hitler posters to protest her cuts-for-cash bailout demands. And last year Trump took clear swipes at Merkel during the bitterly fought U.S. election campaign.

But now she is emblematic of a bloc in which Germany is seen to have enjoyed outsize benefits, even as some other residents of the E.U. find themselves questioning the value of their membership.

On the ancient streets of Rome, posters recently went up advertising an anti-E.U. demonstration organized by the nationalist Polo Sovranista movement. An image of Merkel stood at the center of the poster — between European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and French President François Hollande — under the caption "Against this Europe."

The anti-German sentiment is reaching hyperbolic proportions in some quarters. The chief of Italy's populist Northern League — posturing as Italians brace for possible elections as soon as this year — recently blasted Merkel's Germany as doing with economics what Hitler did with bombs. "They aren't employing tanks, but they're managing to economically subjugate the whole continent," Matteo Salvini said on Italian radio in March.

It isn't just the right-wing populists calling out German leadership. In an interview with The Washington Post, Sandro Gozi, state secretary of European affairs from Italy's ruling center-left Democratic Party, also pointed a finger of blame.

"Whether it is Angela Merkel herself, I don't know," he said. "But the German approach to the euro zone is not effective."

Merkel's handling of European policy is also surging to the surface in Germany, where she is waging a critical reelection campaign. In a nation that lost its appetite to lead after the horror of World War II, it is almost as if some blame her for being too successful at imposing Germany's will on the continent.

Sven Giegold, a Green Party politician and member of the European Parliament, chalked up the high voter support for Le Pen in the first round of France's presidential election last month to anger over "German dominance in the E.U."

"The 21 percent vote for Le Pen is also a result of German politicians' lecturing attitude towards others in Europe," he wrote on his website.

Yet when it comes to leading Europe, rather than seeking power, Merkel and Germany have in many ways inherited it by default. Weak and diminished by his domestic unpopularity, Hollande was ultimately drowned out on the European stage. Italy has had five prime ministers in six years. Britain is more focused on leaving Europe than leading it.

Merkel's supporters, meanwhile, say the chancellor — widely popular among Germans after nearly 12 years in office — is being unfairly blamed. Jürgen Hardt, a close Merkel ally from her center-right Christian Democratic Union, defended her against the charge that her politics of austerity and budget deficit caps have slammed Germany's neighbors. And she has been more flexible on that front than her critics say.

"It's not austerity policy that's to blame but the previous policy of making debts," he said.

As for migrants, Merkel has taken heat for famously saying in 2015 that "we can do this" and suggesting that there was no limit to the number of asylum seekers Germany would accept.

But she has since sought to close the door, forging a deal last year with Turkey to block migrants from entering Europe. In addition, she has taken a harder line on integration — backing legislation passed last week by the German Parliament that imposes a partial ban on full Muslim face coverings.

Hardt conceded that these days, "being anti-E.U. means being anti-German." But he added that Merkel stood out as the sure-footed leader that Europe needs.

"If Europeans could freely vote on who should be the president of Europe," Hardt said, ". . . Angela Merkel would have the best chance."

POLITICO

Welcome to Theresa May's campaign war room

Tom McTague

LONDON — Back in August 1996, sitting in a bar at the Democratic national convention in Chicago, a young Tory operative named Stephen Gilbert had an epiphany. The Conservative Party was doomed.

After 17 years in power, the party was not just going to lose the upcoming election to Tony Blair, Gilbert realized. They were going to lose by a landslide. Blair was Bill Clinton, sweeping all before him. They were Bob Dole.

On his return to London, the then 33-year-old Gilbert drafted a note for

Conservative central office, according to a senior Tory who shared his analysis and was with him in the U.S. They wouldn't like it, but the party needed to retreat from marginal constituencies and concentrate their effort on "safe" Tory seats if they were to stand any chance of avoiding a bloodbath.

His note was ignored. It was politically impossible for John Major to publicly abandon all hope of winning the election. The Tories slumped to their worst election result since 1906, with swathes of Tory blue turning red, submerged by Blair's tide.

Fast forward 20 years and Gilbert is Theresa May's general election campaign supremo. He sits at the center of one of the most ruthlessly efficient and experienced campaign machines in modern British politics, watching a seemingly naive opposition flirt with the same mistakes his Tories made then, unaware of the disaster many pollsters now see as inevitable.

From the "central pod" on the first floor of Conservative campaign headquarters (CCHQ) in Westminster, Gilbert is overseeing an audacious plan to do to Labour what Labour did to them in 1997.

In the 20 years since, the Tories have clawed their way back from just 165 seats to 330 under David Cameron, just shy of Major's result in 1992. According to some of the more dramatic polls published over the last two weeks, the Tories are now on course for anything up to 400 seats in the 650-seat chamber. Even Blair's former constituency of Sedgefield is a realistic target, according to one senior pollster who has crunched private demographic data.

Senior party officials, campaign insiders and Conservative MPs familiar with the Tory strategy, who spoke to POLITICO on the basis of anonymity, paint a picture of a meticulous, tightly-controlled and ambitious Tory campaign, focused on a victory they believe could reshape the British political landscape for decades to come. When approached for this article a party spokesman said Gilbert did not conduct interviews.

Such is the scale of the ambition at Tory HQ that the biggest threat, senior campaign insiders say, is complacency, both internally and across the country at large.

Any hint that staff are taking the election for granted is stamped on immediately. One campaign official said, only half in jest, that being caught looking at newspaper polls in the open-plan office is a sackable offense.

Every morning at 6 a.m. the Tory veteran chairs a meeting of senior campaign officials at CCHQ, an imposing red brick mansion block behind Methodist Central Hall opposite Westminster Abbey.

Tory aides wonder whether Gilbert has the gravitas to take charge with Crosby, a dominant personality, still around.

Clutching coffees laid on by the party, May's reelection team make their way into the wood-paneled Thatcher Room, which is closed off from the rest of CCHQ's ground floor office. Inside hangs a portrait of the former prime minister, alongside two union flags.

Around the table sit Gilbert's collection of all-star political operatives, hired guns from across the world: Lynton Crosby, the Australian campaign guru, and Jim Messina, the U.S. numbers man who helped propel Barack Obama into the White House, or one of his senior operatives if he's not in town. Both helped Cameron win a narrow victory in 2015 but split for the EU referendum, with Crosby steering clear while Messina returned to help Cameron. Messina's involvement failed to prevent Brexit. The U.S. campaigning expert did not predict the surge of support for Brexit among those who had rarely voted before. The miscalculation cost Cameron the vote — and his job.

Despite the problems over Brexit, both were brought back at substantial cost to the Conservative Party, who could not afford at such short notice to cast around for cheaper alternatives, one senior figure in the campaign said.

There for both campaigns was Gilbert — the loyal foot soldier. "One of life's hewers of wood and drawers of water," as one former Conservative cabinet minister said in a somewhat backhanded compliment. He got the job done without question, the Tory grandee said.

Gilbert first came into the party with the old cadre of Tory officials under the doyenne of Conservative elections Sir Tony Garrett, who headed the Conservative Party's national network of organizers on the ground in the 1990s. Jo-Anne Nadler, a Conservative Party biographer and former activist who worked with Gilbert in the 1990s, said Gilbert was "unquestionably the most long-serving and experienced member of the in-house campaign team."

His long-term service to the party was rewarded in 2015 when he was handed a peerage by Cameron, having served as the prime minister's political secretary, acting as the link between No. 10 and the Conservative Party.

However, Gilbert's career in the party is not blemish free. His loyalty to Cameron temporarily cost him his job as the party's deputy chairman during the referendum campaign last year. He had incensed the party's Euroskeptic right by combining his role with a part-time position at Populus, the official polling company for Britain Stronger in Europe, the main Remain campaign group. He resigned citing his "respect" for the party.

After the referendum he joined the U.K. lobbying firm Finsbury, but was brought back into CCHQ as soon as the election was called. "He never really left," one Downing Street aide said.

The deep professional links between those running the Tory campaign have given it a head start on Labour for the June 8 election campaign, insiders say. They didn't have time to think about it — they simply reassembled the team from 2015 and got back to work.

Andrew Cooper, the Conservative party peer and pollster who knows Gilbert well, said: "The campaign is run on autopilot. They all know exactly what they are doing."

However, this time Gilbert, not Crosby, is in charge, in what experienced party officials and MPs believe is a return to traditional party structures of the 1980s, with long-serving operatives trusted with getting the job done having worked their way up from the bottom like May, who served as a councillor before moving into parliament, shadow cabinet, government and finally No. 10. However, this time, unlike 1997, the Tory Party has brought in cutting-edge data and the best campaign gurus from international politics.

Those who know Gilbert reject any notion that his appointment above Crosby — the Australian attack-dog who was given complete control of the 2015 election by Cameron — will lead to a softer, less ruthless campaign. "Stephen Gilbert is basically the modern Conservative Party," one senior official close to the campaign said. "He has been central to so many Conservative campaigns."

One senior Tory MP with a long history in Conservative Central Office said May's team didn't want Crosby in charge because they wanted the prime minister front and center, "not some slick machine."

"They want to preserve the notion that she is doing this reluctantly in the national interest and is not part of some slick campaign being run by some Cameron, [former Chancellor George] Osborne, Boris [Johnson, foreign secretary] acolyte using the aggressive tactics used in 2015," the MP said.

"Stephen Gilbert has been around a long time. I see it as the restoration of the old Conservative Party. They will buy in the expertise they need and Lynton will have been top of that list."

Textor — "a polling genius" according to one insider — has a more prominent role, having only been brought in for the final few weeks in 2015. This time he's in London for the duration of the campaign, working on constituency-level polling, testing key Tory messages in the heart of Labour's traditional strongholds.

Joining them is Isaac Levido, Crosby's Australian sidekick in 2015, who's been brought back into the fold and will also be in CCHQ for the duration of the campaign.

Messina, who jetted into London last week but flew out again on Friday, is also back on board, bringing with him his firm's "vast" data-gathering model, which was crucial to the Tory win in 2015 but conspicuously failed in the EU referendum.

Behind closed doors, Messina boasts that he has 1,000 pieces of data on every voter in the U.K., one admiring Tory official revealed. Using the credit-checking agency Experian, Messina knows where every target voter shops, what they buy, how they travel to work — and much more besides.

Messina and his operatives in the U.K. are busy rebuilding this model for May's battle with Jeremy Corbyn, gathering data over the next couple of weeks ready for a big message push in the final month, two officials familiar with the campaign said.

Awkward footage also emerged of May out canvassing, with one voter caught on camera saying "no thank you" to a visit from the prime minister.

The model works out what people's preferred mode of communication is — whether that's email, phone, text or a knock at the front door — as well as who they trust to deliver the message. One voter might get a leaflet on Brexit from the prime minister. Their neighbor could get a text message on the economy from Philip Hammond, who runs the Treasury.

"When Ed Miliband was talking about five million conversations with voters last time, we were just laughing at them," one senior campaign official close to Cameron said. After running a cutting-edge campaign in 1997, the Labour Party is now dismissed by their opponents

as a band of gentleman enthusiasts. The Tories, meanwhile, have turned professional.

Joining Gilbert, Crosby, Textor and Messina at the top table will be May's two chiefs of staff, Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill. Timothy has been given the job, alongside Cabinet Office Minister Ben Gummer, of writing the Tory manifesto, while Hill is acting as a temporary director of communications, after the previous holder of that position, Katie Perrior, quit amid speculation of a personality clash with Hill.

Digital communication experts Craig Elder and Tom Edmonds, who were credited with effectively using Facebook to target voters in 2015, will also be there, alongside Darren Mott, Gilbert's deputy charged with preparing candidates for campaigning, Alex Dawson, the head of the Conservative research department, and Patrick McLoughlin, the party chairman.

Too many cooks

For all the confidence, question marks remain.

Are there too many cooks this time round? "The first rule of campaigns is you can't run a campaign by committee," said Giles Kenningham, former Conservative director of communications. The Tories tried that in 2010 and many insiders believe it cost them an outright majority against Gordon Brown.

Tory aides wonder whether Gilbert has the gravitas to take charge with Crosby, a dominant personality, still around.

There are also concerns about No. 10's control-freakery. Can May's team hand over to expert campaigners as Cameron did in 2015, or will May's all-powerful chiefs of staff Timothy and Hill demand control?

One Liberal Democrat, who served as a minister in the previous coalition government with the Conservatives and spoke to POLITICO over the past week, also questioned whether the Tories had gone off too quickly. "They'll never be able to sustain the rate they're going out," one former cabinet minister said. "It will turn, trust me." A week into the campaign and the polls showed an increase in support for Labour, albeit still with huge Tory leads.

It hasn't all been plain sailing since May called the snap election two weeks ago. Conservative officials infuriated journalists last week by telling them to get to Norwich for a rally, only to change the destination at the last minute and tell them to get to Enfield instead — at least two hours back in direction they'd just traveled from. Awkward footage also emerged of May out canvassing, with one voter caught on camera saying "no thank you" to a visit from the prime minister.

On policy, May has also showed signs of vulnerability. On tax, she has repeatedly refused to recommit to Cameron's "triple lock" manifesto pledge not to raise income tax, national insurance or VAT. She is also under pressure to unpick her predecessor's commitments on increasing the state pension every year by either 2.5 percent, the rate of inflation or average earnings growth, whichever is largest – a move which threatens the Tories rock-solid support among elderly voters.

Despite a few early mishaps, there is a belief that the election is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to rip up the rule book, to return the Tory Party to what it likes to think of as its rightful position as the "natural party of government," able to win in all parts of the country for the first time since the 1980s.

the Atlantic Are Brits Tired of Politics?

Linda Kinstler

When Theresa May, the U.K. prime minister, called for a surprise snap election in April, she framed the vote as a necessary measure to give her Conservative government a strong mandate to press forward with negotiations over her country's exit from the European Union. A strong Conservative showing in the election, scheduled for June 8, will also empower May to pursue a domestic agenda more aligned with her socially conservative politics, potentially by dismissing unreliable cabinet ministers like Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and David Davis, secretary of state for exiting the EU. It may also embolden the Conservatives to hold a vote on Syrian airstrikes

For Gina Miller, the investment manager who successfully sued the government last year to ensure Parliament would get to vote on invoking Article 50 (the measure signaling the U.K.'s intent to leave the EU), May's plan risks changing the country's fundamental nature. Miller hyperbolically alleges that May will turn Britain into an "electoral dictatorship"—rather than just consolidating her majority. Last week, Miller convened an audience of journalists in a private room at London's Institute of Contemporary Art to announce her plan to foil May's election agenda. Since May announced the snap election just over two weeks ago, Miller has raised over £360,000 to fund the "Best for Britain" campaign, which aims to encourage citizens to vote for candidates of all parties (including Conservatives) most likely to challenge May's vision of a "hard" Brexit—a departure from the European single market and the end of free movement—and demand Parliament secure a final vote on the final U.K. exit deal. Her team has reportedly received £25,000 and office space from Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin Group. Other, similar efforts, such as the Open Britain campaign supported by former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, and a smaller grassroots campaign called Tactical2017, led by Becky Snowden, a 28-year-old digital marketing worker, are also underway.

Soon, these efforts will collide with reality: With 24 days until the vote, the Conservatives still lead Labour by 19 points. Of course, nothing is certain. May needs to overcome her own, sometimes-clumsy campaigning. Perhaps even more importantly, she needs Brits to overcome fatigue—the June 8 election will be their fourth major vote in three years. (In an interview with the BBC that quickly went viral, Bristol resident Brenda seemed to capture the general lack of enthusiasm: "You're joking. Not another one! Oh, for god's sake. Honestly, I can't stand this. There's too much politics going on at the moment. Why does she need to do it?") On the other hand, May's ongoing bickering with European officials could be just the reminder Leavers need, for all intents and purposes, to vote in favor of Brexit once more.

The snap vote could be something of a legacy election for May. Projections show she is likely to increase her Conservative Party's parliamentary majority from 17 to potentially over 100 seats, which would stave off a re-election campaign until 2022, three years after Brexit negotiations are scheduled to conclude. Without expanding her majority in Parliament, she might not be able to pass the final exit deal. "She had promised to go back to Parliament with the deal she got [with the EU], and Labour promised to vote against it. It would only take a small rebellion from Tories for that deal be rejected in the House of Commons, and if that happened, she would have had to resign," Anand Menon, professor of European politics at King's College London, told me. "[The election] means that she's likely to get the Brexit deal passed."

Simon Hix, a professor of political science at the London School of Economics, said that if Brits believe a May victory is a foregone conclusion, turnout could be as low as it was in 2001, the last time a general-election result seemed so certain, when just 58 percent of voters cast a ballot. Of course, a lack of enthusiasm among Labour voters for party leader Jeremy Corbyn could also lead them to stay home: A recent focus group of British voters described him as "scary," "silly," "a joke," and "a wet blanket," while May's Conservatives are more popular than they have been in a half century.

If turnout is low among those who voted for Brexit, and if liberal voters mobilize in time, "then things could actually get interesting," Hix said. "If the lower-income, less-educated voters don't turn out, and if you get mobilization from the pro-Europeans ... then tactical voting will kick in much more." 14,000 voters have already signed up to join the Liberal Democrats, who are the most ardent in their opposition to Brexit, the election was announced, driving party membership to a historic high.

While Brexit's aftermath might be laced with some regret, most Brits still view it as a decisive vote.

Another reason voters may stay home is that the general election is being framed on all sides as a reprisal of the Brexit referendum. While Brexit's aftermath might be laced with some regret, most Brits still view it as a decisive vote, with a rising majority of voters preferring that the government "get on with implementing the result of the referendum." Pippa Norris, a lecturer at Harvard's Kennedy School, said that "people don't want [the general election], but you can understand from the conservative position why Theresa May thought it was a good idea. But for most of the public, they just sigh and say, 'Oh, not this year. Thank you very much.'"

Polling data, Hix said, suggests that in recent British elections, about one-quarter of people vote not for their preferred party, but for the one closest to their views that has the best chance of winning. Yet if strategic voting has any impact on this year's result, it is likely to help

May's Conservatives rather than the Labour and Liberal Democrat opposition candidates, with former UKIP voters throwing their support behind the Conservatives, the party that is actually delivering Brexit.

Despite May's considerable advantages, the early days of the campaign have not been without missteps. She has already come under fire for appearing reluctant to greet the public during appearances in Cornwall, Bristol, and Leeds; she is still virtually certain to win, but in setting the election, she may have overplayed her hand.

No matter how the vote goes, its outcome is unlikely to sway the EU, which has maintained a consistent position throughout the Brexit process: no talk on trade before issues like EU migrants' rights are resolved, and certainly no "painless" departure from the European market. If the reports of May's dinner with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker last week are true, she does not seem to have quite realized that. Juncker left his meeting with May at 10 Downing with the impression that May was living in "a different galaxy" by thinking Britain could take an "a la carte" approach to choosing which EU regulations to keep, and that a U.K.-EU trade deal would be feasible within two years.

Ultimately, Hix said, Brexit's final form will be determined not by May, parliament, or the British people but by the EU. "They'll give us a take-it-or-leave-it deal, and we'll take it, because we'll have to," he said. At its core, the election is about domestic politics, about enabling May to pursue a platform of her own making. "The real Theresa May will be able to stand up," Hix said. The question is, given an unassailable mandate, how will she use it? Will she follow a moderate course, or will she pursue a vigorous platform of social conservatism?

Miller knows a win by the Conservatives is likely inevitable. So she's focusing on trimming their majority to hold them accountable. "It was very telling when [May] made the election speech. She said there's no going back. By doing that, she's putting herself above the law, above parliament," Miller said when we spoke. "Westminster is not an echo chamber. There's supposed to be debate and disagreement." Brexit, she acknowledges, is here to stay, but the form it takes is still to be determined. "It's dated to talk about remaining and staying—we have to be realistic about where we are," Miller said. "But the logical approach, if you take a step back, is that unless politicians are blessed with prophetic superpowers, no one knows what the future will be."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Cross-Channel Clash Over Brexit Points to Trouble Ahead

Stephen Fidler

A war of words between London and Brussels escalated this week, a sign that nobody should take a deal over Brexit for granted.

The furor erupted in part over German press reports from a dinner British Prime Minister Theresa May hosted last week for European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, during which he reportedly concluded she was deluded in her expectations for the Brexit negotiations.

Mrs. May cited press "misrepresentations" in a televised appearance Wednesday outside her Downing Street residence. Together with "threats against Britain" from European politicians and officials and a hardened negotiating stance from the EU's chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier, she said these acts had been timed to affect the result of Britain's June 8 general election.

The spat likely won't spoil the chances of an accord. "The baseline scenario is that there will be a deal: Barnier said he wants it and the U.K. desperately needs it. But the underlying risks are substantial," said Carsten Nickel of the Teneo Intelligence advisory firm in Brussels.

True, there was plenty of election theater in Mrs. May's response, which seemed designed in part to stir up her party faithful, and Brussels reacted accordingly. "We are not naive and we know that each time that elections happen, people get excited," said European Commission spokesman Margaritis Schinas on Thursday.

According to Aaron Timms, head of research for Predata, a New York-based firm that analyzes social-media data, "Bashing the EU and accusing the dreaded unaccountables of Brussels of meddling in the U.K. election…is a good, easy way to fire up the Tory true believers."

But the clash raises important longer-term issues.

First, the leaked accounts of the dinner show that Mrs. May's plan to keep details of the Brexit negotiations secret is doomed to failure.

Brussels leaks like a sieve. Some leaks are tactical, others inevitable because so many actors are involved: officials and politicians from the commission, the European Council and the European Parliament, not to mention diplomats from 27 other governments.

The commission also drew a lesson from the harsh criticism it received over the secrecy surrounding negotiations over the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, the moribund U.S.-EU trade agreement, Mr. Nickel said. "When you do these trade deals, you have to be transparent," he said.

Clearly, if Mrs. May doesn't communicate about the negotiations, others will. A stance of secrecy would put her and her media managers at risk of playing catch-up for the duration of the talks.

Mrs. May also sought to draw a contrast between the EU capitals and Brussels. "However reasonable the positions of Europe's other leaders," she said on Wednesday, "there are some in Brussels who do not want these talks to succeed."

But it is with Mr. Barnier and the commission, the Brussels-based EU executive, that the day-to-day Brexit negotiations will be held.

On Brexit, the EU has done what it usually does when confronted by new crises: It sets up procedures to handle them. Once the procedures are established, the bloc only very reluctantly departs from them—as Greece found out during its seemingly interminable bailout negotiations.

National capitals will, of course, keep a close eye on Mr. Barnier and his team. But history suggests London shouldn't hang its negotiating strategy on persuading Berlin, Paris or other governments to make the U.K.'s case. After all, German Chancellor Angela Merkel was the first to say last week that some in London held illusions about what could be achieved in the negotiations.

Furthermore, whipping up anti-Brussels rhetoric may help win votes during an election campaign, but it risks hindering subsequent efforts to find a positive post-Brexit outcome.

For that, compromises on both sides will be necessary. The U.K., for instance, needs some kind of financial settlement with the EU, as much as it hopes that the figure will fall short of the more than €60 billion ($66 billion) in past spending pledges EU officials have said Britain must honor.

Yet Mrs. May's pro-Brexit constituents aren't being educated by her hard-line rhetoric to ready themselves for compromise, Mr. Nickel said. As a result, Mrs. May risks further polarizing a nation already divided over Brexit and locking herself into a tough position that will reduce the room for the very negotiating flexibility she hoped to gain with a thumping election victory.

So it is that the risks of no Brexit deal—almost universally agreed to be the worst possible economic outcome—remain substantial.

Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council that comprises the leaders of EU governments, alluded to this fear when he said Thursday that a successful deal would be impossible if the two sides let "emotions get out of hand."

But he also suggested that leaking one-sided accounts of private meetings wasn't optimal either. "We must keep in mind that in order to succeed, we need today discretion, moderation, mutual respect and a maximum of good will," he said.

POLITICO

EU maps out plan for 4-week cycles of Brexit talks

Jacopo Barigazzi and David M. Herszenhorn

Formal Brexit talks should be conducted in rigorous four-week cycles, in Brussels, with progress published once a month, according to proposals from EU officials.

The EU also maintains that the U.K. must pick up the tab for the negotiations, including all technical expenses, such as travel costs — essentially sparing the EU budget from Britain's decision to leave the bloc.

It is no secret that the two sides are still miles apart on key substantive issues — not least the U.K.'s financial obligations — but so far even basic details about how the talks will be conducted have yet to

be agreed. No decision even has been taken on the first topic for discussion.

U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May's decision to call a snap general election for June 8 effectively hit the pause button on preparations for the formal Brexit talks, and officials in Brussels stressed that nothing would be certain until after the vote, when May and her team emerge from the so-called purdah period. Given the recent rise in acrimony between EU leaders and May, London's agreement is far from assured.

But despite the uncertainty, a proposed framework from the EU27 for how they want the talks to proceed logistically is well underway, people familiar with the planning in Brussels said. The EU's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier and his task force at the the European Commission envisage that the negotiations be conducted in a rigorous four-week cycle, with one week each dedicated to: internal preparation and consultations; exchange of views between the two sides; negotiation; and reporting back to principles as well as publishing information emerging from the talks, according to senior EU diplomats.

'Feedback and preparations'

The proposed scheme underscores just how complex and painstaking it will be to broker the first-ever withdrawal of an EU country from the bloc. The plan also reflects a demand by leaders of the 27 remaining EU countries for constant oversight of the process, which is expected to take at least 18 months.

"The original idea was to have one week for negotiations [at] political level, one week for technical work, and two for feedback and preparations," a senior EU diplomat said.

EU diplomats have said they expect the U.K. to demand that some negotiating sessions be held in London, if only to illustrate its new outsider status, but that they still envision the lion's share of discussions taking place in Brussels, where expert staff are available to consult on any detail.

A Commission official insisted the talks would take place in Brussels. "Definitely it will be Brussels. They are not going to be in Switzerland, not going to be in London. The U.K. is still a member state, that goes without saying, and the capital of the European Union is still Brussels."

The official said the talks might be held at the Albert Borschette Congress Center, which has ample meeting space, served as the site of past negotiations, including on trade agreements, and is located just a short walk from the Commission.

Another possibility is the talks are held at the Berlaymont, the Commission's headquarters. The official said the venue would largely depend on the size of the negotiating delegations, which has yet to be determined.

The venue could even change at different stages in the talks.

In phases

The four-week cycles would be punctuated as necessary by formal meetings with EU ministers and even by extraordinary summits of the 27 leaders in the European Council.

At the same time, some EU diplomats stressed that any framework for the talks must be flexible so that officials could adjust the schedule as needed.

"With such little time ahead of us, negotiation is going to be intense, sometimes also six days a week, with many stops-and-goes that force us to spend long nights to sort out issues," a senior diplomat said, adding that crucial details such as the first topic of discussion have yet to be decided. The diplomat compared the expected intense rhythm to the emergency talks over the Greek debt crisis three years ago.

EU officials said that if London agrees to the Commission's plan, decisions on the negotiating agenda would likely be made within the first two weeks.

Already the EU's negotiating team is being divided into "Phase 1 people and Phase 2 people" an official said. Experts from the Commission's various directorate generals will also be called in as needed, along with members of the Council's working group, the Commission official said.

Overall, though, the commission official cautioned that many details have yet to be worked out. "I would love to tell you that somebody is working somewhere, carpenters are building negotiating tables as we speak," the official said. "But they are not."

'Brexitize' this

At a POLITICO event Wednesday evening, Martin Selmayr, chief of staff to Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, tried to play down the burden the Brexit talks would place on the Commission, saying that his boss would not spend more than 30 minutes a week on the topic. And the Commission's chief spokesman Margaritis Schinas on Thursday came up with a neologism, saying Brussels "will not Brexitize our work" and is "rather busy" with other files.

But it is already clear that the Brexit workload across the EU institutions will be significant.

"The original idea was to have one week for negotiations [at] political level, one week for technical work, and two for feedback and preparations" — *senior EU diplomat*

Officials said they expected Barnier or a member of this team to report outcomes of the negotiations to a special working group in the European Council. EU ambassadors who now regularly meet weekly in Brussels would likely add a second meeting each week throughout the Brexit talks, officials said, while EU ministers would meet to discuss Brexit once a month.

So far, May's office has not expressed any particular demands regarding the logistics of the talks, other than to state a desire for things to get underway "as quickly as possible" after the June 8 vote.

The New York Times

What's the Matter With Europe?

Paul Krugman

They're also just about equally productive. It's true that the French over all produce about a quarter less per person then we do — but that's mainly because they take more vacations and retire younger, which are not obviously terrible things.

And while France, like almost everyone, has seen a gradual decline in manufacturing jobs, it never experienced anything quite like the "China shock" that sent U.S. manufacturing employment off a cliff in the early 2000s.

Meanwhile, against the background of this not-great-but-not-terrible economy, France offers a social safety net beyond the wildest dreams of U.S. progressives: guaranteed high-quality health care for all, generous paid leave for new parents, universal pre-K, and much more.

Last but not least, France — perhaps because of these policy differences, perhaps for other reasons — isn't experiencing anything comparable to the social collapse that seems to be afflicting much of white America. Yes, France has big social problems; who doesn't? But it shows little sign of the surge in "deaths of despair" — mortality from drugs, alcohol and suicide — that Anne Case and Angus Deaton have shown to be taking place in the U.S. white working class.

In short, France is hardly a utopia, but by most standards it is offering its citizens a fairly decent life. So why are so many willing to vote for — again, let's not use euphemisms — a racist extremist?

There are, no doubt, multiple reasons, especially cultural anxiety over Islamic immigrants. But it seems clear that votes for Le Pen will in part be votes of protest against what are perceived as the highhanded, out-of-touch officials running the European Union. And that perception unfortunately has an element of truth.

Those of us who watched European institutions deal with the debt crisis that began in Greece and spread across much of Europe were shocked at the combination of callousness and arrogance that prevailed throughout.

Even though Brussels and Berlin were wrong again and again about the economics — even though the austerity they imposed was every bit as economically disastrous as critics warned — they continued to act as if they knew all the answers, that any suffering along the way was, in effect, necessary punishment for past sins.

Politically, Eurocrats got away with this behavior because small nations were easy to bully, too terrified of being cut off from euro financing to stand up to unreasonable demands. But Europe's elite will be making a terrible mistake if it believes it can behave the same way to bigger players.

Indeed, there are already intimations of disaster in the negotiations now taking place between the European Union and Britain.

I wish Britons hadn't voted for Brexit, which will make Europe weaker and their own country poorer. But E.U. officials are sounding more and more like a jilted spouse determined to extract maximum damages in a divorce settlement. And this is just plain insane. Like it or not, Europe will have to live with post-Brexit Britain, and Greece-style bullying just isn't going to work on a nation as big, rich and proud as the U.K.

Which brings me back to the French election. We should be terrified at the possibility of a Le Pen victory. But we should also be worried that a Macron victory will be taken by Brussels and Berlin to mean that Brexit was an aberration, that European voters can always be intimidated into going along with what their betters say is necessary.

So let's be clear: Even if the worst is avoided this Sunday, all the European elite will get is a time-limited chance to mend its ways.

POLITICO

Europe to Trump: Don't abandon Paris climate deal

Andrew Restuccia

European leaders are working to persuade President Donald Trump to remain in the Paris climate change agreement, warning of dire diplomatic consequences if the United States withdraws and stressing that the administration would not be bound by Barack Obama's plan to tackle global warming.

But they're also uncertain how best to influence the unpredictable U.S. president — and fearful of angering him if they overplay their hand. So the European officials are mixing diplomacy with quiet attempts to get their message into news coverage and social media, while avoiding any mentions of the retaliation that some angry foreign leaders might pursue if Trump exits the deal.

The coordinated, behind-the-scenes campaign includes efforts by the European Commission and key European Union countries like Germany, France and the United Kingdom, diplomats told POLITICO. They said they're underscoring the harm that would result if the world's second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases were to abandon the most extensive global deal ever reached for addressing climate change.

"Almost anyone that is aware of this debate and is politically engaged in climate is trying to influence this outcome in any way possible," said an international diplomat who, like others quoted in this story, requested anonymity to discuss the sensitive campaign.

Trump's top advisers are set to huddle Tuesday to discuss the fate of the 2015 agreement, and a final decision could come soon afterward.

The debate has divided his most senior aides, with his daughter Ivanka Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in favor of remaining in the pact. Others, including senior White House adviser Steve Bannon and EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt, support leaving the deal, as Trump pledged while campaigning on his nationalist "America First" platform.

Seeking to press their case, European officials have had regular conversations in recent days and weeks with White House and administration advisers, including aides at the State Department, NSC and National Economic Council.

Western diplomats say they fear that a U.S. withdrawal could result in a "domino effect" prompting other countries to follow suit, in the words of one official. "We are trying to clarify that politically, legally, economically, it does make sense for the U.S. to remain," the official said.

European diplomats have largely avoided playing hardball, deliberately eschewing any mention of possible retaliation if the U.S. withdraws, sources said. While the Paris agreement does not include any punitive measures if a country withdraws, individual countries could impose trade-related measures that make it more difficult to do business with nations that pull out of the deal. But international officials insist they are not considering such steps.

But not all the European governments are certain to whom they should make their case. Not only is the White House divided, but the State Department has few, if any, political appointees focused on climate change. And while diplomats stressed that they understand where individual Trump advisers stand on Paris, they are sometimes unsure about the best way to directly influence the president, short of a one-on-one conversation with a head of government.

It's unclear whether foreign leaders will take their case directly to Trump, but diplomats didn't rule out that option. Fijian President George Konrote asked Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to press Trump on the issue when Turnbull and Trump meet Thursday in New York, said Jake Schmidt, director of the international program for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Lacking insider information about Trump's plans, international officials have sometimes relied on the abundant media reports about the closed-door dispute. Diplomats focused on international climate change issues told POLITICO they had never seen inner deliberations leaked to the media as regularly as they have been during the Trump administration's internal debate over Paris.

Administration advocates for withdrawing from the pact argue that remaining would present legal complications for Trump's efforts to undo Obama's domestic climate agenda — a fear that State Department lawyers who helped negotiate the agreement call unfounded. Trump's White House counsel has echoed those concerns in recent days, which some administration officials see as an indication that Trump will ultimately decide to withdraw.

Even so, several administration officials cautioned that things could change, pointing to Trump's last-minute decision last month to remain in NAFTA.

European diplomats increasingly see the media as a character in the drama surrounding Trump's Paris decision, hoping that news coverage of their arguments will make its way to the media-obsessed president.

In doing so, international officials and environmentalists have found themselves in the bizarre position of insisting that Trump has the flexibility to weaken the carbon-reduction commitments that the Obama administration made in Paris — despite their strong desire to see them strengthened over time.

EU Climate Commissioner Miguel Arias Cañete released a statement Wednesday saying the Paris agreement contains room "for a new U.S. Administration to chart its own path." The statement appeared intended to rebut the internal arguments by some Trump advisers who contend the deal prevents countries from weakening their domestic climate targets.

Sources said Arias Cañete has reached out to senior White House and administration officials this week to raise concerns about the possibility of a withdrawal and to persuade the U.S. of the political and economic advantages of staying in the deal.

Laurence Tubiana, who in her capacity as France's climate ambassador played a key role in clinching the Paris deal, took to Twitter on Wednesday to say the American people will lose if the "US government denies them clean energy, green jobs clean air and water and abandons" the pact.

In an interview with POLITICO, she also said the U.S. is not legally bound to stick with Obama's pledge to cut domestic carbon emissions by 26 to 28 percent below 2005 levels by 2025. "That's totally fair from the point of view of the legal aspect of the agreement," she said when asked whether the U.S. could alter its target, adding, "This is not a binding element of the agreement."

She stressed nonetheless that she hopes the U.S. doesn't change its target, saying that doing so isn't in the "spirit" of the deal.

On Thursday, European Council President Donald Tusk took a stab at coaxing the U.S. to stay, urging Washington to look at Norway as an example of a country that's tackling climate change and developing renewable energy while still benefiting from big fossil fuel exports.

"The Norwegian example should provide encouragement to our American friends, as the climate challenge we all face can only be addressed by common global action," Tusk said during a news conference with Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg in Brussels.

Frank Bainimarama, the prime minister of Fiji and incoming president of the ongoing international climate talks, joined in the chorus warning Trump not to withdraw. "Stay the course," he said on Tuesday. "Listen to those around you who are encouraging you to do so."

Separately, a coalition of small island nations that are vulnerable to the effects of climate change said in a Thursday statement that the Paris deal is their "last hope for the survival."

An international diplomat who declined to be named said it is "very clear which country we had in mind when" the small island nations adopted their statement.

"The bad feeling generated among the other 143 countries that have ratified the Paris agreement would infect all areas of U.S. diplomatic interests — not just climate change," the diplomat added. "Everybody would lose."

Indeed, a withdrawal would infuriate the international community, which took pains to ensure that the Paris deal was largely not legally binding at the insistence of the Obama administration. Many world leaders who had preferred a more stringent agreement would see a U.S. pullback as a slap in the face.

Diplomats said a withdrawal would also revive decades-long distrust of the United States that reached a

fever pitch when George W. Bush refused to back the Kyoto Protocol that the Clinton administration signed in 1998.

Meanwhile, major corporations are also weighing in.

Jessica Uhl, Shell's chief financial officer, underscored the company's support for the Paris agreement on Thursday, saying it's the "right path forward for society." Asked if the company has discussed the issue with the Trump administration, Uhl said: "I think Mr. Trump has enough advisers, but we certainly do engage with the administration to ensure that we can grow our business appropriately in the U.S., which is a very important market for us, and influence where appropriate."

Other companies — including Exxon Mobil, which Tillerson led for more than a decade as CEO — have also called on Trump to remain in the agreement.

Bloomberg

The State Department's Needless Warning on Europe

by Leonid Bershidsky

Now, Americans wondering if it's safe to travel to Europe have an official answer from President Donald Trump's State Department: not particularly. It's not a full-blown travel warning, like the ones for Syria, Eritrea or, since March 28, for far safer Turkey, still an important tourist destination. But it's a word to wise tourists, one the agency has issued four times in the last year:

Recent, widely-reported incidents in France, Russia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom demonstrate that the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS or Da'esh), Al-Qaeda, and their affiliates have the ability to plan and execute terrorist attacks in Europe.

State may be trying to protect Americans, but the statistics don't show Europe as any more dangerous. In 2016, a year that saw some of the worst ISIS terror attacks in Europe, seven U.S. citizens were killed in these attacks. 1 In the U.S., a single ISIS-inspired acts of terror in Orlando killed 49 people, and dozens of others sustained injuries in St. Cloud, Minnesota, New York City and Columbus, Ohio.

But the numbers won't stop the State Department from helping to convince Americans to reconsider their travel plans, especially those inclined to agree with Trump and a steady drumbeat of coverage from conservative outlets about the dangers of Islam. Breitbart, for example, slapped this travel warning at the top of its front page on Tuesday with an urgent, all-caps headline.

Not long ago, Breitbart gleefully reported that Germany slipped to 51st place in the "safety and security" ranking of the 2017 Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report, put out by the Global Economic Forum. That happened because of a heightened perception of terror risk, probably because of the December truck attack on a Berlin Christmas market. The story didn't mention that the U.S. was 84th on that list, scoring worse than Germany on terrorism incidence and homicide rate.

In fact, the U.S. compares unfavorably with many European countries on this particular ranking's scale. In addition to lower crime and terror incidence, some of them have more efficient police services.

Want More Safety? Emigrate

Despite the greater danger of bad things happening in the U.S. than in major European nations, you won't find a travel warning or alert about the U.S. on the sites of the German or French foreign ministries. Sensibly, they limit themselves to warning citizens about wars, environmental disasters, uprisings and major strikes. The U.K. Foreign Office, however, advises caution in the U.S. -- against terror, street crime and the Trump administration's various travel restrictions.

When Americans ask me about Muslim ghettos and no-go zones in European cities, I'm often at a loss about what to say. I've traveled extensively throughout Europe and the U.S. for the last 20 years and felt safer everywhere than I do in a Russian tower block neighborhood after dark. But even given my low standard, there is no neighborhood in the EU where I'd worry for my wife and daughters' safety.

Clear thinking from leading voices in business, economics, politics, foreign affairs, culture, and more.

Wedding and Gesundbrunnen, the immigrant-populated areas of Berlin within walking distance from our home, are colorful, friendly places where you're about as likely to be assaulted or mowed down by a terrorist as on Washington's National Mall. Paris's infamous banlieues and Brussels' terrorism cradle, Molenbeek, are safe for strangers who are not out to make trouble themselves. I recommend all these places to American tourists who want to wander off the beaten track and "live dangerously" with negligible risk to life and limb. After coming to terms with the variety of skin hues represented, a loyal Breitbart reader might wonder if these areas can't in fact be models for some of the more run-down U.S. neighborhoods. Europeans aren't big on gated communities and secure buildings, so safety tends to spread around.

The world is dangerous enough. We shouldn't make it scarier for each other by putting out pointless warnings. The Canadian government is right when it tells citizens simply to "exercise normal security precautions" when they go to the U.S. or to Western Europe. We are a pampered minority that lives in relatively safe places, and we should value it more.

In fact, Americans appear to understand that and ignore State's alarmism. In 2016, though most of the year was covered by travel alerts, the number of U.S. citizens who traveled to Europe increased by 6.9 percent from the year before, reaching almost 12.6 million. Despite the distance, that's far more than to any other region of the world.

The Washington Post

Trump is turning other countries against the United States

Fareed Zakaria

There has been much focus on President Trump's erratic foreign policy — the outlandish positions, the many flip-flops, the mistakes. But far more damaging in the long run might be what some have termed the Trump effect: his impact on the domestic politics of other countries. That effect appears to be powerful, negative and enduring. It could undermine decades of U.S. foreign policy successes.

Look at Mexico. For generations, this was a country defined by fiery anti-Americanism. Founded by a radical revolutionary movement, fueled by anger against U.S. imperialism and high-handedness, Mexico would rarely cooperate with Washington. Since the 1990s, the landscape has shifted, indeed almost reversed. Thanks to intelligent leadership in Mexico City and consistent bipartisan engagement by Washington, the United States and Mexico have become friendly neighbors, active trading partners and allies in national security.

Mexico buys more U.S. goods than China and is, in fact, the second-largest destination for U.S. exports, after Canada. Sales to Mexico are up 455 percent since the passage of NAFTA. The country cooperates with the United States on border security, helping to interdict drug shipments and deporting tens of thousands of Central American migrants who aim to enter the United States illegally. Mexico is an ally of the United States in most international negotiations and organizations.

All of this could change easily. Over the past year, as Trump has attacked and demeaned Mexico and its people, the political landscape there has shifted. President Enrique Peña Nieto's already declining approval ratings plummeted after he was seen as too conciliatory toward Trump. It is now quite possible — in fact, likely — that the next president of Mexico will be an anti-American socialist-populist similar to Venezuela's Hugo Chávez. Andrés Manuel López Obrador was polling at about 10 percent at the start of 2015. He is now at about 30 percent, the front-runner among the potential candidates in next year's election.

A victory for López Obrador would be a disaster for Mexico — but also for the United States. It would likely take Mexico back to its days of corrupt socialism and dysfunctional economics, all sustained by populism and nationalism. López Obrador has described Trump as a "neo-fascist," attacked the Peña Nieto administration for being too weak to confront Trump and promised to get tough with Washington. In February, he began a tour of U.S. cities, speaking at large rallies of Mexican Americans and symbolically standing up to Trump.

Now consider South Korea. Trump's demand that Seoul pay for the

THAAD missile defense system, threatening to overturn the existing agreement with Washington, has fueled the forces in South Korea that oppose that system in the first place, along with any aggressive military measures against North Korea. Trump has casually delivered a number of slights to one of the United States' closest allies, accepting wholesale China's claim that Korea once belonged to it and threatening to tear up the U.S.-South Korea free-trade agreement. South Korea is facing a snap election for its presidency, and the candidate who is benefiting most from Trump's antics is the left-wing Moon Jae-in. Anti-Americanism has returned to South Korea in force, though not quite as strongly as in Mexico, where Trump's favorability has been recorded at 3 percent.

Were these trend lines to harden, it could mean decades of difficulty for U.S. foreign policy. Dealing with North Korea is hard enough as it is, but with a recalcitrant South Korea that is determined not to be viewed as overly pro-American, it would become impossible. Tackling issues of drugs, border control and migration would become much harder if the Mexican government recoiled from cooperating with the United States.

There are other places where the Trump effect is also clear. Politics in Iran have become more favorable to hard-liners, and the reelection of the relatively moderate President Hassan Rouhani, once seemingly assured, is now in jeopardy. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appears to be campaigning against him and supporting a far more anti-U.S. candidate. In Cuba, Raúl Castro has gone from inching toward better relations with the United States to lambasting Trump and his policies. Around the world, the United States' friends are embarrassed and on the defensive, and its enemies are gloating.

In foreign policy, great statesmen always keep in mind one crucial reality: Every country has its own domestic politics. Crude rhetoric, outlandish demands, poorly thought-through policies and cheap shots all place foreign leaders in a box. They can't be perceived as surrendering to the United States, and certainly not to a nation led by someone who is determined to show that for the United States to win, others must lose. That's one big difference, among many, between doing a real estate deal and managing foreign policy.

INTERNATIONAL

Los Angeles Times

Trump's latest arrogant overpromise: peace between Israelis and Palestinians

The Times Editorial Board

Donald Trump won the presidency thanks to a series of cocky, what-me-worry promises to solve seemingly intractable problems using his supposedly superior art-of-the-deal negotiating skills.

This week, he made another such promise. After meeting with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at the White House, he vowed flippantly to bring the century-old conflict between Israelis and Palestinians to an end, adding that the problem is "something that, I think, is frankly maybe not as difficult as people have thought over the years."

The monumental arrogance and flat-out ignorance displayed by such an obtuse statement is truly stunning. Virtually all Americans, Israelis and Palestinians, as well as the citizens of every other country on the planet, are in favor of a just, safe, sustainable, mutually beneficial resolution to this conflict, which dates back to the earliest years of the 20th century.

But no one anywhere believes it will be easy. Just like repealing and replacing Obamacare, which Trump initially said would be "so easy" but finally conceded: "Nobody knew healthcare could be so complicated."

By all means, Trump should try his hand at Middle East peacemaking. Perhaps his Chauncey Gardiner-type naïvete — and the fact that he is apparently unburdened by any historical or political knowledge of the subject — will give him some bizarre advantages that are not available to more sophisticated students of the conflict.

But for the record, since no one else appears to have told him, here are some of the factors that make this particular conflict knottier and more troublesome than the president seems to realize.

Any agreement between Palestinians and Israelis must overcome more than 100 years of hatred and mistrust, built on a long history of killings and terror and dispossession and imprisonment and broken promises.

Israel's most generous offer ever, made in the final days of the Clinton administration, simply didn't meet the Palestinian demand for an independent state along the lines that existed before the 1967 war, with East Jerusalem as a capital and a resolution to the ongoing refugee problem. If one side's best offer doesn't meet the other side's minimum requirements, there's a problem.

Palestinian and Israeli leaders must wrestle not only with each other, but with hard-liners on their own side who have already proven their willingness to scuttle any agreement that relies (as any agreement must) on compromise.

Abbas is disliked and mistrusted by his own people, two-thirds of whom said last year that he should resign.

And there are more: How to divide resources, including water. What to do about the millions of Palestinian refugees. How to handle the 1.6 million Palestinians under Hamas rule in the Gaza Strip.

Peace is not impossible. But like virtually all the issues that reach the Oval Office, it is not easy either. It involves sorting out equally valid but irreconcilable claims; making least-bad, zero-sum game choices; relying on judgment calls and subjective political calculations. It will require a president to be tough, even-handed, imaginative and realistic at the same time.

Is Donald Trump up for it? His glib, uninformed pronouncements are not encouraging.

Bloomberg

Trump Looks for Opportunities in the Middle East Crisis

by Eli Lake

As Donald Trump prepares for his first foreign trip as president later this month, he has big plans. Beginning May 19, Trump will travel to Riyadh, Jerusalem and Rome. He hopes to find a path to peace for Israel and the Palestinians. In the Middle East's crisis, Trump sees an opportunity.

The crisis part is obvious. The region has been coming apart since his predecessor began his second term in 2013. The Islamic State has created a proto-caliphate. Iran has stepped up its support for violent radicals throughout the region. The civil war that is collapsing Syria is flooding Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Europe with millions of refugees. War rages in Yemen. The Libyan state has failed.

The opportunity is less obvious. Sunni jihadis like al Qaeda and the Islamic State and Shiite jihadis supported by Iran threaten the Gulf monarchies. But they also threaten Israel, the historic rival of these kingdoms. Now that the Arab states and the Jewish state have a common enemy, perhaps they can find common ground and agree to a two-state solution for Israel and the Palestinians.

This is the working theory at least, according to White House officials who briefed reporters Thursday on the upcoming foreign travel. One said that Trump and Arab leaders have shared objectives, and that this administration should try to solve the 70 year Israeli-Palestinian conflict, now that Israel's strategic interests aligned more closely with the Arab states.

H.R. McMaster, Trump's national security adviser, made a similar point on Tuesday evening at an Israeli Embassy event to mark the country's independence day. He said the current circumstance in the region "may allow us to resolve what some have regarded as intractable problems, problems like disputes between Israel and the Palestinians."

In some respects this approach is hardly new. As I reported in 2015, Israel and Saudi Arabia during the Obama years were deepening a quiet collaboration against Iran and Sunni jihadists. This relationship though has not come out of the closet. Like Israel's nuclear arsenal, it is well known in the region, but not officially acknowledged.

The key to normalizing Israel's quiet alliance with the Gulf kingdoms hinges on a two-state solution. When former Saudi officials have been asked about this over the years, they always say there will be no formal peace between the two countries until the Palestine file is settled.

Trump also has another advantage in this respect. Unlike Obama, he is not invested in the success of the nuclear deal with Iran. Obama's efforts to court the Iranians undermined any chance for the U.S. to bring Iran's enemies closer together. He once mused to the Atlantic that Iran and Saudi Arabia needed to learn to share the Middle East. Trump doesn't suffer from this delusion.

Unfortunately he suffers from another delusion. He believes he can forge a peace deal between the Israelis and the Palestinians, even though every president since George H.W. Bush has tried and failed. Here it's important to get some perspective.

To start, neither the Palestinian Authority president, Mahmoud Abbas, nor the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has the political room at the moment to compromise. Abbas is 82 years old, at the end of his life, and he doesn't have any political control over Gaza, which is run by Hamas, a group that rejects negotiations with Israel. On Wednesday at the White House, Abbas said Palestinians supported a "culture of peace." But this is false. Abbas himself has praised as martyrs Palestinians killed and arrested in the recent wave of stabbing attacks. The Palestine Liberation Organization to this day pays the families of Palestinians killed or jailed for terrorist attacks. Public squares are named for the murderers of Jews. Even if Abbas wanted a peace deal, he is no position to persuade his people to accept it.

Netanyahu on the other hand presides over the most right-wing government in Israel's history. His main political rivals support the abandonment of the two-state solution altogether. The Israeli leader's supporters want him to expand settlements in the West Bank, seizing further land the Palestinians say should be preserved for their own independent state.

Another problem is that the demands of both sides are not really compatible. Abbas supports for example the return of all refugees expelled by Israel since the 1948 war. If implemented that would make the Jewish population in Israel a minority. The Israelis still consider Jerusalem its capital. The Palestinians want a portion of the city as the capital of their eventual state. The Israelis demand a semi-permanent military presence in the West Bank. The Palestinians have balked at this demand.

Clear thinking from leading voices in business, economics, politics, foreign affairs, culture, and more.

Share the View

Eventually Trump and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, will learn about these obstacles themselves. In the meantime Trump can take advantage of more modest opportunities in the current Middle East crisis. He could build on recent diplomatic work to get the Israelis to stick to the agreement they made with the George W. Bush administration to build only within the large settlement blocks in and around Jerusalem. Obama discarded that agreement when he came into office and pressed Netanyahu to end all construction in occupied territory, including in East Jerusalem. Trump could also press Arab leaders to pressure the Palestinian Authority to end its payments to the families of terrorists. He could encourage further cooperation between Israel and the Arab states against Iran and other terrorist groups. Finally, Trump could move forward with his plan to ease the strain on the West Bank economy as the Palestinians wait for a new generation of leadership and try to get back to the agenda of reforming the Palestinian Authority's notoriously corrupt and inefficient government institutions.

None of this is as dramatic as forging a peace deal. But it has the advantage of being possible for the moment. And who knows? If these more modest steps work, perhaps an opportunity for real peace will emerge from the current crisis.

Putin Has a New Secret Weapon in Syria: Chechens

Paul McLeary |

The Russian intervention in Syria has been, by most accounts, a success. And Russian President Vladimir Putin is going to do everything he can to keep it that way.

Beginning with an air campaign on behalf of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in September 2015, Russian forces have not only stopped regime losses but also helped Damascus retake Aleppo city in December 2016. Now with the opposition stronghold under government control and Assad's hold on power no longer in question, Moscow has said it plans to reduce its presence in the country. But while some Russian forces did initially depart in early January, Moscow is actually expanding its role in Syria. Russian officials announced major expansions to Russian military bases in the country while the number of private contractors fighting on the Kremlin's behalf also swelled.

Most interestingly, however, Putin deployed an unprecedented Russian weapon to Syria: several units of Chechen and Ingush commandos hailing from Russia's restive North Caucasus region.

Until recently, regular Russian forces in Syria were largely limited to being a support crew for aircraft conducting strikes across the country. Apart from a few notable exceptions — artillery and special forces deployments in Hama province and military advisors alongside Syrian troops in Latakia — Moscow's ground game in Syria has been minimal. But the ongoing deployment of the Chechen and Ingush brigades marks a strategic shift for the Kremlin: Russia now has its own elite ground personnel, drawn from its Sunni Muslim population, placed across Syria. This growing presence allows the Kremlin to have a greater role in shaping events on the ground as it digs in for the long term. Such forces could prove vital in curtailing any action taken by the Assad regime that would undermine Moscow's wider interests in the Middle East while offering a highly effective method for the Kremlin to project power at a reduced political cost.

The exact role and size of the Kremlin's new brigades are still uncertain. Initial open-source reports on the ground placed the number of Chechens deployed in December at around 500, while some estimates suggested a total of 300-400. The number of Ingush is reportedly slightly smaller, at roughly 300. Despite their designation as "military police," the units are reportedly drawn from elite Spetnaz formations within the Chechen armed forces and are being employed in a role far beyond the simple rear-area guard duty that's typical of such units: manning checkpoints, distributing aid, guarding bases, and even coordinating the defense of pro-government strongholds with regime forces.

"I think this represents Moscow's grudging recognition that it's stuck in a quagmire," says Mark Galeotti, a senior researcher at the Institute of International Relations in Prague. In their hybrid civil-military role, capable of a wide range of operations, these brigades have become a go-to deployment for the Kremlin as it seeks to assert itself in

various theaters abroad. Chechen fighters have appeared alongside pro-separatist Russian "volunteers" in eastern Ukraine, and several battalions of Chechen servicemen also entered Georgia during its brief war with Russia in August 2008, occupying the town of Gori. At least some of the Chechen troops deployed in Syria have combat experience in eastern Ukraine, with the Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* reporting that one of the Chechen commanders is Apti Bolotkhanov, who spent substantial time fighting alongside pro-Russian forces in the Donbass.

But beyond their skill on the battlefield, the brigades are valuable to Moscow for other reasons.

But beyond their skill on the battlefield, the brigades are valuable to Moscow for other reasons. Russian society and leadership have proved extremely sensitive to casualties in Syria; the Kremlin has gone to extreme lengths to hide its losses. Casualties are often only publicly confirmed after observers find the tombstones of deceased soldiers in their hometown cemeteries. Moscow's official figures only account for 30 dead in Syria — with the true figure likely much higher. Using nonethnic Russian special personnel might protect the Kremlin from a public backlash sparked by rising battlefield casualties. Losses incurred by the new, North Caucasian contingent are unlikely to trigger such a response. Russian society carries a deep-seated resentment toward natives of the region, in particular Chechens, after two wars in the 1990s and multiple terrorist attacks since.

Gregory Shvedov, the editor of the Caucasian Knot website and an expert on the North Caucasus, says popular disdain toward the region is a major factor for the deployment of these personnel. "Cynically speaking [it would be much easier for Putin] if the Chechens or other [troops] from the Caucasus would be killed in Syria … than those from other regions of Russia," Shvedov notes.

Employing these fighters offers Moscow another major advantage. The natives of the North Caucasus are almost entirely Sunni Muslims, a faith they share with the majority of Syria's population. Since the first units arrived in December 2016, Moscow has sought to use their shared religion and appearance to its advantage. North Caucasian units have been documented using handbooks that include helpful suggestions for dealing with locals, such as the liberal use of the word "*mukhabarat*" (Syrian secret police) — implying detention and other nasty repercussions — should a request be met with resistance. On a more cordial level, Chechen military police have been told to use shared Islamic words to build friendlier relations with the public, relying on various religious epithets to greet locals when on a patrol. The conversion of an ethnic Russian soldier to Sunni Islam, conducted by Chechnya's grand mufti in front of Syrian onlookers in Aleppo, was another public relations maneuver utilizing the shared faith between Syrians and the servicemen.

While the deployment of the Caucasian brigades represents a new phase of Russia's intervention in Syria, Moscow's use of its Muslim-majority regions to reach out to the Middle East is not new. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov has often acted as an interlocutor between Moscow and Sunni Arab states, making state visits on behalf of Putin and attracting Gulf investors to the Chechen capital. Kadyrov has attempted to cast the Chechen capital, Grozny, as a center of international Sunni discussion on the state level, hosting numerous international forums where Chechen figures were the sole representatives of Russia's 20 million Muslims. The aim of such conferences is generally to discredit Salafi Islam, the hard-line strain followed by most jihadis.

Syrian officials themselves have begun to engage closely with North Caucasian authorities. A delegation from Damascus including Syria's minister of religious affairs visited the Dagestani capital of Makhachkala in March, discussing counterradicalization with Dagestani authorities and students. In present circumstances, where it is rare for Syrian officials to make any foreign trip, let alone to a far-flung region of another country, the Makhachkala trip is significant in demonstrating the depth of Moscow's use of its Sunni Muslim region as an outreach tool. Most recently, the head of Damascus University announced in mid-April that his institution is opening a campus in Chechnya. Given these religious and cultural links, Moscow is banking on its new Muslim-majority brigades to prove more amenable to the Syrian populace than its ethnic Russian soldiers.

As Moscow's footprint deepens, North Caucasian special forces have taken on increasingly important tasks across Syria, from guarding Syrian Kurdish units against Turkish incursions in Manbij to ensuring the success of negotiated rebel evacuations on the outskirts of Damascus. The growing role of the brigades demonstrates a desire on Russia's part to wield greater influence over areas of Syria it deems crucial, particularly in the face of occasional tension with its Syrian and Iranian allies. Although outward appearances suggest solidarity, Moscow has occasionally clashed with both Damascus and Tehran. Perhaps the most publicized example of this uneasy alliance came during the late stages of the Aleppo campaign. Iranian officials were reportedly incensed with the terms of a cease-fire brokered for the city by Russia and Turkey in December 2016 that were imposed without their input. Iran later intentionally scuttled the deal, using its Iraqi and Syrian proxy forces to resume fighting in Aleppo. Not coincidentally, Moscow's first Chechen soldiers arrived in Syria within weeks of that event.

The importance for Moscow in being able to control unexpected events on the ground was highlighted in late January when rumors began to spread that Assad had suffered a stroke. Adding fuel to the fire, some opposition figures claimed that the Syrian president had flown to Beirut for treatment; Damascus uncharacteristically denied the claims instead of ignoring them, fueling the speculation. Amid the uncertainty, reports emerged that with Assad's health failing, Iranian forces were posturing to install his brother Maher, who is rumored to not be among the Kremlin's preferred list of successors. Within several days, Assad returned to Damascus and held a series of publicized meetings, calming the situation. But the incident highlighted the value for Moscow in having its own ground forces in the Syrian capital.

As part of its strategy to further control events on the ground in Syria, the Kremlin has also elected far more secretive means to expand its footprint.

As part of its strategy to further control events on the ground in Syria, the Kremlin has also elected far more secretive means to expand its footprint. To bolster its regular forces, Moscow has employed a sizable private military contractor (PMC) that now has nearly four years of experience in the country. First known as the Slavonic Corps, the group's first mission in 2013 in Syria proved a major debacle, but after rebranding itself and gaining stronger Kremlin backing, the group redeployed to Syria as part of Moscow's official intervention in 2015. Now called Wagner, the group is headed by Dmitry Utkin, a former intelligence officer in the GRU, Russia's foreign military intelligence agency, who first deployed the PMC in operations in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Obtaining precise statistics on the group is difficult, but the most accurate estimate by the Russian daily *RBC*, whose experts have broken numerous stories on the group, puts their number at 2,500. Russia's regular forces in Syria total around 5,000, so when combined with its brigades from the North Caucasus and its PMCs, Moscow's true ground strength in the country has swelled significantly.

The first stage of Moscow's Caucasian adventure in Syria ended on March 27, as the deployed Chechen military police returned home after their first tour. The soldiers were greeted by Kadyrov himself in Grozny and received several awards for their service. But the Chechens' initial success appears to have earned them another tour. Less than a month after the return of the first military police battalion, Kadyrov announced on April 19 that a new unit of Chechens had just been deployed to Syria.

The Ingush battalion, meanwhile, continues to function in Damascus, having been spotted in the center of the capital throughout April. There are signs that the Ingush battalion is becoming more involved in front-line action with rebel forces in the Syrian capital. In Damascus's Jobar district, the scene of heavy fighting in March, rebels reportedly intercepted communications indicating that some Ingush officers, as well as some remaining Chechens, were coordinating much of the pro-government defense of the area. The Ingush battalion will reportedly return home from its tour in May.

Another tour is yet to be announced for the Ingush battalion, but given the units' early successes, expect to see Russia's North Caucasian specialists appear in locations across Syria as the war grinds on. So far, the deployment of Chechen and Ingush forces has been very surgical, appearing only in areas and events Moscow considers critical to its aims in Syria. And while their role is unlikely to expand greatly anytime soon, the North Caucasian battalions will continue to serve as the tip of the spear in Moscow's wider strategy to expand its influence in Syria.

POLITICO **North Korea accuses U.S. of assassination attempt on Kim Jong Un**

By Kyle Pomerleau, Scott Drenkard and John Buhl

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea on Friday accused the U.S. and South Korean spy agencies of an unsuccessful assassination attempt on leader Kim Jong Un involving bio-chemical weapons.

In a statement carried on state media, North Korea's Ministry of State Security said it will "ferret out and mercilessly destroy" the "terrorists" in the CIA and South Korean intelligence agency for targeting its supreme leadership.

North Korea frequently lambasts the United States and South Korea, but its accusation Friday was unusual in its detail.

The ministry said the spy agencies in June 2014 "ideologically corrupted and bribed" a North Korean citizen who had been working in Russia to carry out the alleged assassination on Kim after returning home.

It said South Korean agents gave $20,000 and satellite communication equipment to the North Korean to attack Kim during a public event with a bio-chemical weapon, such as a "radioactive" and "nano poisonous" substance.

The ministry threatened that a counterattack would begin immediately. "Korean-style anti-terrorist attack will be commenced from this moment to sweep away the intelligence and plot-breeding organizations of the U.S. imperialists and the puppet clique," it said, referring to South Korea.

Officials at South Korea's National Intelligence Service were not immediately reachable for comment.

the Atlantic

The Korean Peninsula's Other High-Stakes Drama

S. Nathan Park

To be clear, there's never a good time for a crisis on the Korean peninsula. But this is an especially tricky time, as South Korea gears up for its presidential election on May 9. Unsurprisingly, North Korea policy is one of the major fault lines in South Korean politics: The country's conservatives are more hawkish towards the North, its liberals more dovish. Liberals tend to subscribe to former president Kim Dae Jung's "Sunshine Policy"—named for the Aesop's fable about the wind and the sun trying to take off a traveler's cloak—which advocates warm engagement with North Korea. The conservative counterpart is former president Lee Myung Bak's "Massive Retaliation," which promises a disproportionate, devastating response to any provocation from the North.

Since late 1990s, the liberals and conservatives have traded power in South Korea, causing the country's policy on North Korea to swing back and forth from dovish to hawkish. Outgoing, disgraced President Park Geun Hye appeared to blend the two, outlining her own brand of "Trustpolitik" in her then-acclaimed Dresden Address delivered in 2014. Of course, the world now knows there was little substance behind Park's bold pronouncement; Choi Soon Sil, a woman with only a high-school education and no official position in the government, was the one marking up Park's speech. This revelation, along with Park's bizarre extortion of South Korea's major corporations in order to keep Choi's slush fund flush, led to the president's impeachment and removal.

Park's impeachment has, in turn, led to a liberal surge in South Korean politics, as her scandal tainted her fellow conservatives. Liberal Moon Jae In of the Democratic Party, who narrowly lost the 2012 presidential election to Park, is leading the latest polls with an average level of support in the low-40s. Center-left Ahn Cheol Soo of the People's Party and conservative Hong Joon Pyo of the Liberty Korea Party trail Moon in a virtual tie of around 18 percent support each. In short, barring a dramatic turn of events in the coming days, Moon Jae In will likely become the next president of the Republic of Korea.

Moon, who began his political career as chief of staff for the former liberal president Roh Moo Hyun, would likely maintain the liberals' policy of emphasizing engagement with North Korea. He supports North Korea's denuclearization through the resumption of the six-party-talks framework of the early 2000s, the promotion of cultural and sports exchanges, and a gradual reunification that would begin with the formation of a single market. This raises the challenge of coordinating North Korea strategy with Washington, Seoul's most important ally.

With President Donald Trump, that word *challenge* weighs heavily. Compared to the Obama White House, the new U.S. administration is taking a decidedly more aggressive stance. On his recent visit to South Korea, Vice President Mike Pence declared that the "era of strategic patience is over," referring to Obama's policy of applying pressure on North Korea through diplomatic means. South Korea objected that this was not the agreement; Trump's National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster later walked back the president's comments.

Can Moon Jae In work with Trump? There is precedent for the pairing of a hawkish, conservative U.S. president with a dovish liberal in Seoul. George W. Bush overlapped with two liberal South Korean presidents, Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun, both of whom who pursued a radical degree of engagement with Pyongyang. Yet Bush and his counterparts got on surprisingly well. In a press conference following the first meeting between Bush and Kim in March 2001**,** the Republican president had nothing but glowing praise for Kim's North Korea policy: "He is leading, he is a leader."

The Bush administration had a rougher time with Roh. After the September 11 terrorist attacks, Bush declared North Korea a member of the "Axis of Evil" (along with Iran and Iraq, which had hardly any connection with North Korea.) Meanwhile, when the underdog Roh won the presidency of South Korea in 2002, he did so at least in part by riding the wave of anti-American sentiment following an incident in which a U.S. armored car ran over and killed two middle school girls in a northern exurb of Seoul. Known as a brash speaker, Roh went so far as to say in October 2004 that the regime of then-North Korean leader Kim Jong Il had "a good reason for wanting a nuclear weapon." Remarks like this made Roh the most unpredictable among all the heads of states that Bush met, according to Michael Green, senior director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council in the Bush White House.

On North Korea, the hawks are never entirely hawkish, nor are the doves all that dovish.

But in the end, Bush and Roh worked well together also. Roh repeatedly sought assurances that Washington would not start a war on the Korean Peninsula, which Bush repeatedly provided. In response, Roh made certain that South Korea remained a reliable ally. When America invaded Iraq, Roh immediately offered South Korea's support, dispatching 3,600 troops for the post-war rebuilding effort in 2004 despite severe domestic opposition. According to Green, because of Roh's commitment to the U.S.-Korea alliance, Bush came to value Roh Moo Hyun more than France's Jacques Chirac or Germany's Gerhard Schroeder.

In fact, the Korea-U.S. alliance remained stable even after the dynamic reversed, when the more hawkish Lee Myung Bak—he of "Massive Retaliation"—took office in 2007 and was paired with the less-hawkish Barack Obama. This reveals an important lesson about the relationship between Seoul and Washington where Pyongyang is concerned: Despite different levels of rhetoric and posturing, the end result does not change much when it comes time to take action. The fundamental, if unspoken, rule in relations between North Korea and South Korea has always been the same: Localized provocations will yield a response, but no one—not even the most saber-rattling of leaders—wants full-scale war.

On North Korea, the hawks are never entirely hawkish, nor are the doves all that dovish. When the North Korean navy engaged in provocations in the Yellow Sea in 1999 and 2002**,** the supposedly dovish Kim and Roh retaliated by killing scores of North Korean seamen. When a North Korean submarine sank a South Korean naval ship and killed 46 sailors in

2010, the Massive Retaliation promised by Lee produced only another round of verbal denunciations. Through all this, the United States has supported South Korea's actions, regardless of the reputed difference between their presidents. This gives reason for optimism, regardless of the barbs from the Trump administration. For his part, Moon Jae In said in a recent interview with *The Washington Post* that he would meet with Trump at the earliest possible opportunity to discuss North Korea. Despite widespread misgivings in South Korea over Trump's belligerence, Moon said, "I believe President Trump is more reasonable than he is generally perceived."

In fact, if war does break out one day, it may not be from deliberate hawkishness but from a series of miscalculations based on inadvertent, incorrect signaling. From this perspective, the Trump administration's embarrassment with the *USS Carl Vinson* is particularly worrisome. Despite the grand pronouncement that an armada was steaming toward the East Sea to respond to the North Korean threat, the naval-strike team was in fact thousands of miles away from the peninsula and was heading the opposite direction. What if North Korea had taken the Trump administration at its word and escalated tensions further—perhaps by attacking a target in South Korea, prompting further retaliation that would eventually escalate into Chinese and American intervention? The true danger is not the hostile words, but the unsteady hands. This means that the real challenge for Moon Jae In, if elected, may not be lowering the rhetorical heat emanating from Washington, although that too would be necessary from time to time. Moon's most important challenge in the U.S.-Korea alliance may be to promote greater communication and cooperation between the two allies, such that the Trump administration does not blunder into a nuclear war.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Trump's Plan to Isolate North Korea Faces Trouble—in the South

Jonathan Cheng

SEOUL—The U.S. bid to isolate North Korea faces a major test next week in South Korea, where an advocate of more engagement with Pyongyang is favored to win the presidential election.

Moon Jae-in was chief of staff a decade ago when South Korea's then-president met in Pyongyang with the current North Korean leader's father during a period when Seoul showered the North with humanitarian and economic aid, called the Sunshine Policy.

If elected, as appears increasingly likely, Mr. Moon has suggested he would renew such efforts, engaging economically with the North in a policy his advisers call Sunshine 2.0. That would mark a big shift from the hard-line approach of ousted President Park Geun-hye and potentially put Seoul at odds with Washington.

Last week, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson urged countries at a United Nations Security Council ministerial session "to suspend or downgrade diplomatic relations with North Korea," and to "cut off a flow of needed resources."

Ms. Park, too, had sought to sever Pyongyang's ties with the rest of the world by wooing North Korea's closest allies with military and economic aid. Her impeachment following bribery and abuse-of-power accusations triggered Tuesday's special election.

Mr. Moon, who has about 40% support from eligible voters, saw his lead erode in recent weeks as North Korean provocations lifted the prospects of a rival who called for a tougher line on North Korea. In response, Mr. Moon toughened his rhetoric on Pyongyang, saying its provocations are making it difficult to avoid tightening sanctions.

In recent days, Mr. Moon's lead has widened as his more conservative rivals have split the remaining votes. Eurasia Group, which had lowered Mr. Moon's chances of winning last month to 55%, this week boosted those odds to 80%. The candidate with the most votes wins.

In contrast to his fellow candidates, Mr. Moon has argued that isolation hasn't worked. He has pushed for reopening two inter-Korean projects from the Sunshine Policy era—a jointly-run industrial business park and a tourist resort. Both could potentially send millions of dollars to North Korea.

Mr. Moon's rivals have questioned whether South Korea can reopen those projects without violating U.N. Security Council resolutions aimed at reining in North Korea's weapons program.

And Mr. Moon wouldn't stop there. His advisers say that restarting the two projects would be just a "steppingstone" toward what Mr. Moon calls "economic unification," with many more inter-Korean projects to come. He also would seek to organize a summit with the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un, his advisers said.

Mr. Moon said he also would reassess whether to allow a U.S.-backed antimissile system aimed at blocking a North Korean attack to operate on South Korean soil. The system, called Thaad, began operating this week.

Mr. Moon declined requests for an interview. But Choi Jong-kun, a professor of international relations at Yonsei University in Seoul who helped Mr. Moon craft his platform on North Korea, said in an interview that Mr. Moon's approach would differ from those of his predecessors.

Under the Sunshine Policy, Mr. Choi said, South Korea often supplied aid without demanding progress on denuclearization. In contrast, Mr. Moon would explicitly link inter-Korean cooperation with such efforts.

A decade after the last inter-Korean summit, Mr. Choi said that North Korea should be confronted as an economic problem, not a political one.

"North Korea should not be dealt with in an ideological domain because it's already been won," Mr. Choi said. "We see it primarily as a lost economic opportunity. We should be there to capitalize North Korea."

That attempt at rapprochement with the North is likely to bring South Korea into conflict with Mr. Trump's policy. Mr. Tillerson last week called for "no relaxation in the vigorous implementation of sanctions" on North Korea.

Jeffrey Robertson, an expert on South Korean diplomacy at Yonsei University, said Mr. Moon's policies would potentially strain the alliance between Washington and Seoul.

"Any U.S. policy to further isolate North Korea is going to come up against the policies of the new South Korean administration," he said.

Also unclear is whether North Korea would accept any restraints on its nuclear and missile programs. It has so far steadfastly resisted pressure from abroad.

Robert Kelly, a professor of political science at Pusan National University in South Korea, compared the potential tension to the early 2000s, when Mr. Moon's engagement-minded boss Roh Moo-hyun, South Korea's then-president, struggled with the George W. Bush administration's tougher approach.

Mr. Kelly said Mr. Moon's conciliatory policy might make South Korea a global outlier, given the North's nuclear and missile programs, and such controversies as its alleged involvement in the killing earlier this year of Kim Jong Nam, the half brother of Kim Jong Un.

"I don't see it meshing well," Mr. Kelly said. "If Moon wants to go back to the Sunshine Policy, he has to prove what's different this time around."

THE DAILY BEAST

Venezuela's Dystopian Nightmare

Raúl Stolk

When Hugo Chávez was sworn in by Rafael Caldera, who handed over the presidency in 1999, the incoming leader made sure to add a quip to the oath of office that would become a kind of tagline for the next few years: "I swear, upon this dying constitution."

Even after winning the election, Chávez was still in campaign mode. He had promised a new constitution and he was dead set on delivering. Not an easy promise, since the constitution, back then, did not include a reset button; a mechanism to erase itself and produce a new foundational document. And of course it didn't. That would would be contrary to its nature. So Chávez had to go to great lengths to produce the result he promised. But he was effective, and in so doing got some very much needed political wins during his first 100 days (you know how important those are). The whole process took one year.

The Venezuelan supreme court paved the way by hashing out the concept of originary power, establishing that the only thing that was above the constitution was the will of the people. Then, the members of the assembly were elected by popular vote (in a gerrymandered election in which the Chavista front ended up with 95 percent of the seats by winning with 52 percent of the votes); and, finally, by December 1999 the new document was approved via referendum. As a consequence of the reboot, it was determined that general elections had to be held, meaning that Chávez had a two-year practice run.

The new constitution does include its own means of self-destruction.

2017. Nicolás Maduro stands before a meager Chavista crowd composed of bored public employees and a few drunken supporters called to Avenida Bolívar for the presidential May Day address. The live show does not matter. What matters is how it looks on TV. Neighbors of this symbolic downtown Caracas avenue have taken to making videos of Maduro gatherings on TV, and then showing how they really look from their windows. Maduro wears a blue sports jacket. Underneath, the rim of a red T-shirt shows. It's an outfit reminiscent of the one Chávez wore in his epic last day of campaigning in 2012, when he withstood a storm, while cancer was eating away at him, to deliver his final address. Even when the effort may have contributed to his demise, this was one of the key moments of the mythology: The Eternal Giant.

So here's Maduro, a few years later, trying to recreate the moment, for what he deemed "a historic announcement" that was to shake the country to its core. The historic announcement came as a surprise to no one. A day earlier, Julio Borges, current president of the opposition-held parliament, had spilled the beans, saying Maduro would call for an illegal constituent assembly in which only Chavista-affiliated groups would participate. So Borges acted as a buffer to the effect that the announcement would have, and when Maduro screamed, in a trembling voice, that he was summoning the originary power of the people to call for a constituent assembly, he was met with little enthusiasm.

A new constitution for peace and for real national dialogue, he says.

Maduro fumbles with words, as usual. He repeats the word *"Constituyente,"* referring to the constituent powers of the assembly, at least five times in the same phrase. The president is nervous. It shows. He has made a huge gamble.

Opposition-led protests have intensified all over the country, and brutal repression by the national police and national guard has been impossible to sweep under the rug, even when the government has a strong grip on the local media. Traditional Venezuelan diplomatic allies are starting to feel uneasy, and the U.S. State Department has put its crosshairs over Venezuela again. New legislation is under discussion in the U.S. Congress to sanction more Venezuelan officials linked to corruption and drug trafficking.

At least two young men have died by tear-gas bombs shot at point blank range to the chest, one of them a 17-year-old. The death toll, a consequence of the crackdown of government security forces on protesters, is well over 30. The violent actions of these officers have been recorded in hundreds of viral videos, where they can be seen shooting tear gas into apartment buildings and ganging up on solitary protesters to beat them down.

A most terrifying episode, this Wednesday, involved a protester being run down by an anti-protest vehicle.

Nights in cities across the country resemble scenes of dystopian horror movies, as pro-government paramilitary groups surround buildings in neighborhoods that protest against Maduro. They are heavily armed and patrol on motorbikes, wearing masks. One of the opposition's main demands is disbanding and disarming these groups.

The other demands are as critical to the opposition as disbanding the paramilitary: restoring the powers of the National Assembly (parliament); liberating political prisoners like Leopoldo López, who has been held in isolation for more than 30 days and the government was forced to issue a proof of life after rumors that he had died; opening a humanitarian channel for Venezuelans with no access to food and medicine; and holding a general election as soon as possible.

The key issue—holding a general election in 2017—obviously has to do with electing a new president. For that to happen, and for it to have a minimum legal packaging, both Maduro and his vice president would have to resign. The Chavista-controlled supreme tribunal would have to step in and direct the process with a constitutional interpretation that may imply an immediate surrender of power to the opposition (i.e., providing that the president of the parliament hold the presidency and call for an immediate election). Needless to say, it's a complicated road.

So the constituent assembly route, considering that the last time it involved a new presidential election, may sound tempting to some members of the opposition. Especially when they have flirted with the idea before as a strategy to drive Chavismo out of power.

Legal experts, however, have been clear that Maduro's call for a constituent assembly is fraudulent, since, according to the constitution Maduro wants to change, the president could only submit an initiative that would have to be voted on by the Venezuelan electorate. Once approved, the process to select the assembly would begin.

While Venezuelans have been waiting for over a year for the elections authority (CNE) to establish a calendar for regional elections that were to be held in December 2016, CNE Chairwoman Tibisay Lucena received the president's request to activate the formation of the assembly and appeared in a live TV broadcast with him to read the decree. Maduro appointed a presidential commission, composed of his closest allies, to move forward with the process.

After being called out for furthering the coup that began with their attempts to annul the legislature, government spokespeople have been all over the place. While Maduro was clear during his May Day address that only Chavista-affiliated groups would participate in the constituent process, he later backtracked, saying it would be a process subject to free and universal elections. Diosdado Cabello, PSUV heavyweight, called it a *mandatory* dialogue. Others have said their intention is not to reset the whole constitution, but just a provision here and a provision there, some quick fixes that Chávez wanted to make and wasn't able to. If this were the case, the mechanism would not be a constituent assembly but a reform.

In 2007, Chávez proposed just such a reform, which the country rejected in a referendum that was one of the first electoral victories of the opposition. Chávez called it a "victory of shit" and completely disregarded it, eventually reforming the constitution anyway so he could run indefinitely for the presidency.

Even now, experts are debating whether this move was part of a long-running plan to establish soviets and communist rule in Venezuela or a mindless reaction to the pressure brought to bear by the protests—and if it could be the beginning of a conversation that moves toward transition.

Either way, most are turning to the how and the when will this happen, putting aside the why and forgetting the disruptive effect that Chavista strategies have on political turning points.

Chavismo, once again, has changed the conversation. This time, in the midst of the worst humanitarian crisis the country has ever faced, and within the collapse of constitutional institutions.

Sadly, in Venezuela, the constitution is a political pretext, not a foundation to build upon.

Bloomberg

A New Constitution Would Deepen Venezuela's Crisis

by Noah Feldman

With Venezuela on the brink of a constitutional crisis, President Nicolas Maduro has called for the election of a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution. It's a terrible idea -- potentially more of a power grab than a genuine attempt to resolve the crisis through negotiation. It's also a reminder that creating a new constitution shouldn't be an excuse to stop the operation of an existing elected government. An orderly constitutional transition requires an orderly process.

The crisis is largely of Maduro's making. In late March, the Venezuelan Supreme Court, dominated by Maduro supporters, claimed to assume all the powers of the democratically elected National Assembly.

A day later, the court reversed itself, in response to criticism that its order amounted to an effective coup. But the revised order still gave Maduro the power to make energy deals with outside companies without legislative approval, which is required by law.

Several weeks of protests have followed, and the National Assembly has told energy companies that any deal Maduro might make with them would be unlawful.

Maduro's next move was to call for elections for a constituent assembly. Under Article 348 of the 1999 constitution drafted under the direction of Hugo Chavez, the

president has the power to call for such an assembly.

And under the 1999 document, it would seem that a constituent assembly can take over all powers of government. Article 349 says that "the existing constituted authorities shall not be permitted to obstruct the Constituent Assembly in any way."

Thus, Maduro's idea would be for the newly elected body to sideline the National Assembly and govern on its own until it also writes a new constitution.

In theory, that sounds like it could be a solution to the conflict between the president and the assembly. There are several serious problems, however.

The first is that Maduro doesn't seem to want a full and fair democratic election for the constituent assembly -- elections that might well give power to his opponents. Instead he called for "county by county" elections for half the members, and for the other half to be elected or chosen by specific groups of people defined broadly as, for example, the "working class," "social movements" and recipients of social benefits.

If the county elections each yielded a single member of the new assembly, that wouldn't represent the population proportionately, because rural counties have fewer citizens than urban ones. Presumably such an outcome would favor Maduro's rural, agricultural base.

As for the selections based on social sectors, Maduro's government would probably be able to gerrymander the results to favor their interests.

Beyond the potential unfairness of the elections, however, lies a deeper problem: The idea that a body elected to write a constitution should also assume the power to govern in the interim. Sometimes a version of this arrangement is inevitable. In the aftermath of true regime change, the transitional assembly may need to govern as it writes a new constitution.

In Tunisia, after the Arab Spring, the elected constituent assembly was the same body as the functioning national legislature. But in a clever and consequential move, the same assembly functioned on different days of the week as the governing body and as the drafting body. Some members preferred to focus on government and others on producing a constitution for the future. Remarkably, this split-personality assembly/legislature worked, and a compromise driven, liberal democratic constitution emerged.

But where there hasn't been regime change, a constituent assembly shouldn't govern. It should make rules for future governance. The intermingling of the two tasks is an invitation to abuse. In particular, it's an invitation for the assembly to delay production of a constitutional draft. As long as no new draft has been produced, the constituent assembly continues to rule -- a flagrant conflict of interest that arguably posed a problem even in hypersuccessful Tunisia.

The world seems to get that Maduro's proposal is highly problematic. The U.S. State Department said it viewed the proposal as a "step backward." Brazil's foreign minister went further, saying it amounted to a proposed coup.

That leaves the tricky question of how Venezuela ought to work its way out of the existing crisis. The best solution would be for Maduro to return to governance structures under the 1999 constitution, perhaps in exchange for an offer by the opposition to pause the street demonstrations until a working arrangement can be reached.

Clear thinking from leading voices in business, economics, politics, foreign affairs, culture, and more.

Share the View

It's worth remembering that the U.S. Congress under the Articles of Confederation kept functioning before, during and after the drafting of the U.S. Constitution. Calling for a new constitution shouldn't include trashing the existing system in the interim. Maduro's proposal may look constitutional under the 1999 document. But that doesn't mean it follows best practices of constitutional order -- or that it's genuinely democratic.

ETATS-UNIS

THE DAILY BEAST

GOP Votes to Cut Care for Millions—and Cheers

It was all celebration on the House floor on Thursday afternoon as Republicans rejoiced as their bill squeaked by and their albatross was now passed to Mitch McConnell's neck.

With a vote of 217-213, with 20 Republicans voting against it, Zombie Trumpcare officially lumbered towards the upper chamber where it faces an uncertain future, at best, in its current form.

But it was clear in the House chamber that Republicans were just living for the moment. The bill's passage provided the kind of much-needed, short-term victory that Republican leadership and the Trump administration so desperately craved. The president, himself, spent part of Wednesday calling members and asking for their votes.

The first time around was largely defined by a hard, threat-filled sell by the administration that epically failed to move nearly enough votes within the hardline-conservative faction in Congress, nor the more moderate holdouts.

It's passage also begins to complete a promise in the making since the early days of the Obama administration—and one that was a cornerstone of President Donald Trump's campaign.

"We're going to get this passed through the Senate, I feel so confident," Trump said in the Rose Garden during celebratory remarks following the vote. "[Obamacare's] been a catastrophe. and this is a great plan. I actually think it will get even better."

"A lot of us have been waiting seven years to cast this vote," Speaker Paul Ryan said in his remarks before the vote.

On Thursday morning, the mood inside the House chamber was jovial.

Majority Whip Steve Scalise confidently strode onto the House floor, shaking hands and throwing even a fist-pump, as he made his way through the chamber.

Today was not going to be a failure for House Republicans. Today, they made good on a promise they made for the past seven years: repeal and replace Obamacare. At last.

Kind of.

But not really.

Because the bill that squeaked through on Thursday does not repeal Obamacare. It does get rid of the unpopular mandate requiring that people carry insurance, but at the same time, it allows insurers to charge people who go without health insurance for two months more for their insurance.

Under the last ditch changes to the bill, states can apply for waivers from a range of essential health benefits—including pre-existing conditions—in order to offer lower cost plans, according to Republicans. A hastily crafted provision authored this week offers an additional $8 billion to help pay for the high risk pools, but experts on both side of the ideological spectrum say that that number is nowhere near enough to actually make a difference.

The bill, as is, is still loaded with pitfalls. Trumpcare would be disastrous for special-needs education, for one, and people with employer-based insurance could also be in the cross-hairs if the legislation ever made its way onto President Trump's desk.

Speaking of the cost, because the bill that passed on Thursday afternoon did not have the customary scoring from the Congressional Budget Office, it's unclear how many billions it would take to implement the bill.

Also unknown? How many people would lose their insurance. The last CBO score on March's doomed bill, put the number who will lose their insurance by 2026 at 24 million.

This uncertainty was one reason why not all Republicans were ready to pop the champagne.

As he headed into the imminent vote, Rep. Walter Jones, who voted 'no,' looked morose, repeatedly slamming his party's Obamacare repeal plan. "There are so many unknowns in this bill," he stressed. "Those of us not involved in drafting the bill, we're stuck with a lot of unknowns."

He also mentioned that there are thousands of military veterans residing in his district who "this bill

doesn't help" and might actively hurt.

"This is an interesting game and it should not be a game," he continued. "It's become a very political game...This is people's lives."

Jones noted the hypocrisy of Republicans who complained about Democrats "jamming through" the Affordable Care Act who now approve of House GOP leadership's tactics in past weeks. He also said he had no hope to offer regarding the bill's chances in the Senate.

"I don't think you can fix a bad bill [in the Senate]--and this is a bad bill," he told The Daily Beast.

Shortly after, Rep. Greg Walden, who was instrumental in crafting and pushing through Trumpcare, hurried into the chamber. As he was asked by multiple reporters if he was concerned about potential blowback against House Republicans by angry voters, Walden just vigorously shook his head with a frown on his face.

Republican congressman and a deputy Majority Whip Tom Cole stressed that this was only the beginning for his conservative fellow travelers. "Anybody who thinks this will be the exact same over there [in the Senate] is being naive," Cole told The Daily Beast on Thursday. "These things are always hard."

Rep. Mark Sanford—a House Freedom Caucus member who Trump specifically threatened over his prior opposition to Trumpcare—plainly acknowledged that if the Senate sends back a battered, watered-down version of Zombie Trumpcare, the House could be in for another round of the kind of pitched ideological battle that doomed the bill the first time.

"I think there's a tendency to get ahead of our skis in any victory," Sanford cautioned, immediately following the vote.

As the dust settled on Thursday afternoon, the mood among House Democrats was mixed. Some, including the Democrats on the House floor who loudly chanted “Goodbye” at Republicans for voting for health-care legislation that fewer than one-in-five Americans support, are openly giddy that Republicans have now gone on-record in their embrace of Zombie Trumpcare. They believe the bill will get mangled and potentially destroyed in the Senate, and that attack ads against vulnerable Republicans will write themselves between now and the 2018 midterms.

Other Democratic lawmakers, however, are anything but excited about the AHCA’s current state of affairs. Whatever happens in the upper chamber, Trumpcare has successfully been put on life support, and then some. And it’s that uncertainty—regarding a bill that has the potential to strip millions upon millions of Americans of their health care—that will keep them up at night for the foreseeable future.

“Every Democrat I've spoken to is terrified that this thing actually has a chance of becoming law,” Democratic congressman Joaquin Castro told The Daily Beast just minutes before the deciding votes.

Bloomberg

The Senate Holds All the Cards on Health Care

by Jonathan Bernstein

If it's true that the entire health care reform effort since January has been one large exercise in blame-shifting, then Paul Ryan and House Republicans have successfully -- for now -- shifted blame for the failure to repeal and replace Obamacare over to the Senate. With 20 Republican defections, but with many Republicans in tough districts still having to cast tough "yes" votes, the House passed the American Health Care Act by the razor thin margin of 217 to 213.

The bill as passed is, as the kids say, a hot mess, and it sure doesn't seem to have many enthusiastic supporters. They did manage to separately pass a bill to keep their bill from protecting members of Congress and their staff members from what they are doing. But they rushed it to the floor before getting a score from the Congressional Budget Office. That's not just about how it would affect the federal budget deficit; they also passed this thing without any careful analysis of what the bill-as-amended would actually do. The original version, pulled from the House floor back in March, would have reduced the number of insured Americans by an estimated 24 million; we don't know whether this version will do better or worse. Nor do we have any neutral estimates on how it would affect premiums or anything else.

We do know that the bill polls very badly, and it's unlikely that individual provisions poll well -- there's not a lot of support out there for cutting off funding for special education, for example. Or ending the ban on lifetime caps or protections for those with pre-existing conditions -- including for those with employer-linked insurance. This really differs from Obamacare, where most of the individual provisions were popular, but not the overall law. And recently, the Affordable Care Act itself has become popular, anyway, making the Republican repeal effort even more risky for them.

The biggest questions now are about what will happen in the Senate. This is a "reconciliation" bill, which means it will be protected against filibusters and will need only a simple majority to pass. But it also means that only certain provisions (those that affect the federal budget) can be included. It's entirely unclear what the Senate parliamentarian -- an unelected official who singlehandedly makes major decisions on the reconciliation process -- will allow, and what Mitch McConnell and Senate Republicans will do if the parliamentarian turns what the House has done into Swiss cheese by stripping various provisions from it.

Nor is it clear that 52 Senate Republicans (with the support of Vice President Mike Pence to break ties) are enough to pass anything. To begin with, it seems likely Maine's Susan Collins and Alaska's Lisa Murkowski will oppose anything that retains the House bill's hit on Planned Parenthood. Another half dozen or more Republican Senators have spoken against the measure's cuts to Medicaid. And then Kentucky's Rand Paul wanted a full Obamacare repeal, and it's possible a handful of others (Ted Cruz of Texas? Mike Lee of Utah?) might join him in opposing the House bill (let alone anything modified to get the votes of Collins and Murkowski) as too weak.

It's absolutely possible that Senate Republicans can figure out a way forward, but it should be at least as hard for them to get their version of the bill over the finish line than it was for House Republicans to do so. It may be even harder at this stage of the process: Several members of the House said that they were counting on the Senate to modify things, but senators have less leeway to pass the buck in the same way.

Harder, but not impossible. If the Senate does pass something, and assuming the House isn't willing to just rubber-stamp that version, then the two chambers would have to hammer things out in a conference committee. And the math is still extremely daunting: House Freedom Conference radicals simply want a bill that doesn't appear to have 50 votes in the Senate.

That said: It is true that the Freedom Caucus showed some ability to compromise on this. They did an impressive job of moving the bill toward their position, but what almost all of them voted for today was still considerably short of what their ideal bill would have been.

My guess is that it's still fairly unlikely that any version of this makes it into law. President Donald Trump is hosting a victory party at the White House for House Republicans today, and I still think their best strategy is to just pretend that they've killed off Obamacare for good, and then go on administering it.

A daily round-up of superb political insights.

Jonathan Bernstein's Early Returns

But make no mistake about it: Something could very well pass. Even if very few House or Senate Republicans are excited by their bill and are fully aware of the electoral risk some of them are taking, politicians like to do what they promised, and they -- as a group -- promised to repeal and replace Obamacare. Many of them also remain individually more worried about being defeated in primaries if they take the blame for failure than they are about being defeated in general elections because they are blamed for voting for something unpopular. Only the latter can cost Republicans their congressional majorities. They do care about those majorities, and some of them are worried about their own general election prospects. But in the short run, the most powerful factor may be blame-shifting, and it's still possible they could blame-shift this thing all the way to final passage and a signing ceremony.

POLITICO

Senate GOP rejects House Obamacare bill

Burgess Everett

After all the energy the House just expended on ramming through its Obamacare repeal, the Senate is about to start over.

“We’re writing a Senate bill and not passing the House bill,” said Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn). “We’ll take whatever good ideas we find there that meet our goals.”

They need to end up with a bill that can win over 50 of the 52 GOP senators in the narrowly divided chamber. And even if they accomplish that, their bill could be unpalatable to House conservatives. The House bill squeaked through on a 217-213 vote.

The two chambers have not coordinated much in recent weeks as the House — with an assist from the White House — frantically worked to kick the health care bill to the other side of the Capitol. Senate Republicans say they’ll take the time they need to understand the House bill’s ramifications. And they will insist on a score from the Congressional Budget Office before voting, unlike the House.

“Like y’all, I’m still waiting to see if it’s a boy or a girl,” said Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.). “Any bill that has been posted less than 24 hours, going to be debated three or four hours, not scored? Needs to be viewed with suspicion.”

The Senate GOP has been preparing for health care to land in its lap, but only in the most general fashion and with little input from the House. Two key House committee chairmen briefed the entire GOP caucus on the lower chamber’s plans in March, but there has been nothing equivalent since then.

“I turned the volume off some time ago and have no idea what the House is even passing,” Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) said shortly before the House vote was scheduled.

Alexander has established a working group ranging in ideology from conservative Texas Sen. Ted Cruz to the more centrist Ohio Sen. Rob Portman, some of whom met with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) on Thursday. McConnell said Thursday that the House vote was "an important step," but the Senate won't move forward on anything until the parliamentarian and CBO review the bill.

They're holding preliminary discussions of how to remake the House’s plan to gut Obamacare’s Medicaid expansion by 2020, shrink and reshape the tax credits that subsidize insurance, and allow insurers to charge more — potentially much more — to sick people than healthy people. That could effectively price people with pre-existing medical problems out of the market, which polls show is highly unpopular.

Almost all of those provisions worry many members in the more moderate upper chamber. Senate Republicans are considering staunching the coverage losses projected under the House by altering the Medicaid repeal, making tax credits more generous and strengthening protections for people with pre-existing conditions.

“There will be no artificial deadlines in the Senate. We’ll move with a sense of urgency but we won’t stop until we think we have it right.” said Alexander, who will be a leading figure in the Senate’s overhaul effort.

For instance, the Senate is likely to increase the transition period for cutting off the Medicaid expansion beyond 2020. A significant bloc of Senate Republicans represent states that expanded, and many have been told by their governors to fight for more Medicaid funding.

In March, Senate leaders insisted they could pass a repeal of Obamacare in a week. Now senators say the debate is likely to go into the summer, taking a month or more. Alexander would not say Thursday whether he’ll have public hearings.

Senate Majority Whip John Cornyn (R-Texas) said the Senate’s timeline for repealing the law has nothing to do with the calendar. “When we have 51 senators, we’ll vote," he said. "Not until then.”

“I would have loved to have done it yesterday,” he said. “Invariably, these things take longer than you’d like.”

If the Senate can pass a bill it is sure to be at odds with the more conservative House. And because Republicans can lose only two votes in the Senate, they must also somehow keep in line a trio of conservative senators — Mike Lee of Utah, Ted Cruz of Texas and Rand Paul of Kentucky — while also appealing to more moderate members.

“It’s close to near-impossible. Except we’ll get it done,” insisted Senate Finance Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch (R-Utah). “I’ve been at near-impossible a couple of times. And we always get it done.”

And many Republicans are worried about facing the same heat over pre-existing conditions that House Republicans are now confronting. Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) spoke to Maine’s insurance superintendent on Thursday to figure out how people with pre-existing conditions would be treated and said it was “very difficult to assess” due to how rushed the House process was.

“Some questions have been raised around the mechanisms for pre-existing conditions. We're going to have to look at that, a few other provisions,” said Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina.

Collins and Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), for example, both oppose the bill’s attempts to defund Planned Parenthood, while Medicaid and pre-existing conditions have emerged as other severe fault lines. Several Republicans from states that expanded Medicaid, including Murkowski, Portman and Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, are leery of unrolling that program. Immediately after House passage, Portman said he doesn’t support the House bill, as did Sen. Dean Heller of Nevada, the most vulnerable Republican up for reelection in 2018.

Alexander said he wants to give states more flexibility for Medicaid and “to do that in such a way as to not pull the rug out from under those who rely on the Medicaid program.”

McConnell convened a group of senators from across the Senate GOP to begin plotting out a party strategy. Senators will begin meeting frequently on Obamacare and “get into the meat of it,” said a source familiar with the meeting.

They’ll also have to try and get buy-in from K Street. The powerful Washington health care lobbying machines had largely sat on the sidelines during the House debate, knowing the more substantial fight would be in the Senate. Now those lobby groups are ramping up, aimed at Senate Republicans.

And because Republicans are using a fast-track budget process called reconciliation to repeal Obamacare without Democratic support, the GOP must adhere to strict parliamentary rules. Democrats are vowing to bring down the bill for running afoul of those rules, though Senate Republicans can rewrite the legislation to adhere to them. That might require tossing out significant portions of the House's repeal bill, possibly including a key linchpin that allows states to waive coverage requirements.

“There are questions about that,” said Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.). “There may be things that they included that will have a difficult time.”

Those restrictions are what makes it impossible to fully repeal and replace Obamacare in one swoop. And conservatives, notably Cruz, are already agitating to ignore the Senate parliamentarian.

Democratic leaders are confident none of their members will lend a vote to the GOP and are eager for Republicans to assume blame for the consequences of their legislation.

“I would be surprised if Senate Republicans can pull together and [pass] this. if they do, they will hold the entire bag for the huge rapid cost increase in premiums," said Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.).

And if Senate Republicans can deal with all these headaches, the House would have to accept the Senate’s changes or the two bodies would have to work out their myriad disagreements. House Republicans seem to think it will get more conservative in the Senate, though they may be in for a big surprise.

“The bill will change in the Senate,” said Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.), chairman of the House Freedom Caucus. "And just to be clear, I think it will get better.”

the Atlantic How Obamacare Repeal Could Run Aground in the Senate

Russell Berman

As recently as a week ago, the 52 members of the Republican Senate majority hardly expected to debate a repeal of Obamacare at all. The House had supposedly abandoned its effort in March, having pulled its bill from the floor rather than watch it go down in defeat. While a group of senators had begun meeting on the issue, they treated the possibility of a successful House vote with great skepticism.

Now, however, the fate of the nation's health-care system has landed on their doorstep. And although President Trump on Thursday said with confidence that "we're going to get this through the Senate," the reality is that Republicans in the upper chamber might not vote on the American Health Care Act at all. Instead, the Senate will likely try to write and pass its own bill that would then have to be reconciled with the House version and approved by both chambers once more.

In a legislative body that prides itself on taking its own sweet time, that is unlikely to happen soon.

"The Senate will now finish work on our bill, but will take the time to get it right," said Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, the chairman of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee. The *Washington Examiner* reported Thursday that a group of 12 senators is now working on a legislative proposal, though according to Senator John Cornyn of Texas there is "no timetable" for finishing it.

Starting from scratch is not how Majority Leader Mitch McConnell envisioned an Obamacare repeal bill. The original plan was for the Senate to quickly adopt the House version once it passed in March—quick and easy. But Republican senators began criticizing the AHCA as soon as it was introduced, ensuring that even if it passed the House, it would be subject to amendment in the Senate.

Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky campaigned against the legislation from the right, denouncing the proposal as "Obamacare-lite" and rallying the House Freedom Caucus to block it from passing without changes. Along with Senators Ted Cruz of Texas and Mike Lee of Utah, Paul has pushed for a complete repeal of the current law and did not endorse the changes the Freedom Caucus won for the House bill to weaken its insurance mandates.

On the other side of the Republican caucus, more moderate senators like Senators Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska criticized its deep cuts to Medicaid and a provision aimed at cutting off funding to Planned Parenthood. Portman, Capito, Senator Dean Heller of Nevada and others also hammered the Medicaid sections, particularly the House bill's provision sunsetting the expansion of the program that several Republican governors adopted. "Although I will carefully review the legislation the House passed today, at this point, there seem to be more questions than answers about its consequences," Collins said in a statement.

McConnell has earned a reputation as a talented legislative tactician and dealmaker who has held his caucus together more effectively than Speaker Paul Ryan or his predecessor John Boehner have in the House. But his margin for error on Obamacare is razor-thin; Republicans can afford no more than two defections, meaning that some combination of staunch conservatives like Paul, Cruz, and Lee will have to endorse the same bill as Collins, Murkowski, and Heller, who is up for reelection in 2018 in a state Hillary Clinton carried in November. McConnell offered little indication about his thinking in a boilerplate statement he released on Thursday, which simply reiterated his desire to repeal and replace Obamacare.

The other obstacle Republicans face is the Senate's complex budget reconciliation rules for passing a new health-care bill with a simple majority that is not subject to a Democratic filibuster. The bill cannot add to the deficit over the long term, nor can it make policy that goes beyond taxing and spending. House Republicans tried to write their bill in accordance with the Senate procedure, but Democrats have warned that the provisions they added to win votes in the last few weeks won't fly. And while the House passed its measure without a final cost and impact assessment from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, the Senate parliamentarian must wait for the CBO report to determine if the legislation abides by the reconciliation rules.

House Republicans celebrated their legislative feat at the White House on Thursday, reveling in a bill declared dead just weeks ago. But as the Obamacare spotlight moves to the Senate, their jubilation might end up being more than a little premature.

Bloomberg

Obamacare Is Still Not Dead Yet

Max Nisen

The tenth jolt of a defibrillator usually won't revive a patient. But it seems to have worked for the American Health Care Act, the Republican Party's plan to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act.

The AHCA seemed headed for a House vote Thursday afternoon, and hospital stocks tumbled as investors worried about the possibility of lost revenue and higher costs. But it would be a mistake to prep for doomsday just yet. Even if this bill succeeds in the House, there are still many firewalls keeping it from becoming law in anything like its current form.

Update: The AHCA passed the House by two votes along party lines Thursday afternoon. That somewhat dates the next couple of paragraphs, but everything about the law's issues and remaining firewalls is still true. The Senate will write its own version of the bill instead of taking up the House's version.

For one thing, the bill could still fail in the House. GOP leadership claims to have the votes it needs, but any passage will come with a razor thin margin, and this vote may be a tactic to pressure wavering members. The bill's latest version is substantially more conservative than when it nearly came to a vote in March, and substantially riskier for Americans with pre-existing conditions. It would let states waive requirements that insurers not charge sick people more for insurance and cover "essential health benefits" such as hospitalization, prescription drugs, and maternity care. It could make insurance all but unaffordable for the chronically ill. Such changes might have bought conservative votes while turning off moderates.

The bill will fund high-risk pools to subsidize sick patients, but such programs have worked poorly in the past and could be dramatically underfunded by this law, according to an analysis by health-care consultants Avalere. A last-minute addition of $8 billion in funding to help people with pre-existing conditions managed to buy some votes, but won't buy much more coverage. And these extra funds may actually encourage more states to cut pre-existing protections. As that becomes clear to members who were only able to see the full text of the bill very recently, more may get cold feet.

Essentially the entire medical establishment opposes the bill on moral and financial grounds. The combination of wildly unpopular pre-existing protection cuts, lost insurance coverage, and the optics of gouging Medicaid and subsidies for poor Americans to pay for tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations will make for some difficult 2018 re-election campaigns.

The House is set to vote without an updated analysis of the bill from the Congressional Budget Office -- in other words, with no concrete idea what it will do to insurance markets, how much it will cost, or how many people it will leave un- or underinsured. The CBO analysis of the earlier bill estimated 24 million people would lose coverage over 10 years, potentially devastating for some hospitals and insurers. This version could be worse.

The bill might also result in employers providing less-generous coverage and imposing lifetime and annual coverage caps as they did pre-ACA, potentially affecting millions of Americans who get coverage at work.

This bill is even worse than the previous version for hospitals, who may be forced to provide more uncompensated care, and for certain insurers, who may lose millions of customers.

But it is unlikely to pass the Senate in its current form, providing one firewall for companies and individuals in its path.

The GOP can only afford to lose three votes in the higher chamber, and many more senators than that registered concerns with even the milder version of the bill. Meanwhile, even some arch-conservative members such as Ted Cruz may still be unsatisfied with this bill. The Senate also must wait for what will likely be a grim CBO analysis. And the Senate must abide by complicated rules to pass the bill with a simple majority rather than 60 votes.

If the bill survives at all, it will probably be changed dramatically. Moderate senators have the upper hand in the Senate and will likely want to soften the portions of the law that will negatively impact hospitals, insurers, and drugmakers. They will likely want the bill to cover more people, to better protect those with pre-existing conditions, and to leave Medicaid more intact.

And that dynamic creates yet another firewall: If a less-draconian bill does make it out of the Senate, then it will go back to the House -- where it may not pass muster with the conservative House Freedom Caucus, which derailed the initial version of the AHCA for being too soft.

The most reassuring outcome for hospitals and Medicaid insurers would be the bill going down in flames in the House on Thursday. But even if it survives this test, investors shouldn't immediately assume it means the end of days for these companies or the ACA.

The battle to end Obamacare is just getting started

The fight to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act is just getting started.

President Donald Trump and House Speaker Paul Ryan deserve significant credit for getting their alternative, the American Health Care Act, or AHCA, across the finish line. But the version of health reform that the Senate will send back in the coming weeks or months will likely look very different from the legislation the House passed Thursday. And that's a good thing. While the House bill included a number of important reforms, the Senate has an opportunity to improve upon what was passed and address some of the concerns that the bill's critics have expressed over the last several weeks.

There are at least three key policy issues that Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and the Trump administration will need to address to get the consensus necessary among Republicans to pass a bill through the upper chamber. These are difficult issues to resolve, but the GOP has little choice but to act, given the promises the party has made for seven years about getting rid of Obamacare and replacing it with more market-driven reforms.

First, Medicaid reform will be a sticking point. The AHCA fundamentally changes Medicaid from an open-ended entitlement program, where the federal government is on the hook for a theoretically limitless amount of spending, to one where it spends a fixed and predictable amount of money per year. This change could be particularly problematic for states that chose to accept Obamacare's Medicaid expansion, which extended eligibility to anyone making less than 138% of the federal poverty level (about $16,000 a year in 2017). The challenge is that these states aren't all governed by Democrats -- 11 GOP governors, including John Kasich and Chris Christie, took Obamacare's Medicaid expansion. Republican senators from these states are concerned about how the transition will affect Medicaid coverage and will therefore be looking for a gentler transition from the current financing system to the new one proposed by the AHCA.

Second, there will be a debate over the nature and magnitude of assistance offered to low-income Americans for the purchase of health insurance. The AHCA includes a refundable tax credit, based on the age of the recipient, to assist in the purchase of private coverage outside the employer-sponsored system. Some analysts have complained the tax credit is too skimpy, while some conservatives have attacked the subsidy as creating yet another government entitlement. The Senate is likely to make the tax credits more, not less, generous, in an effort to help cover more people. Targeting more assistance to low-income Americans on the cusp of Medicaid eligibility will also help more of them acquire private coverage and push them away from Medicaid, which is an outcome most conservatives favor.

Finally, the issue of how best to help those with pre-existing conditions will likely be the most politically volatile of the debates to come. Obamacare's approach was to mandate a set of essential health benefits, impose restrictions on an insurer's ability to deny coverage based on health status and limit the factors on which insurers could base their premiums as well as the extent of variance in those premiums. Many Republicans who voted against the AHCA, as well as almost all Democrats, have accepted that this is the only way to deal with the issue.

But the House-passed legislation shows there is a different, more targeted way, to address the problem. It offers states the opportunity to opt out of the Affordable Care Act's rigid regulatory regime and includes a significant amount of funding (up to $123 billion over 10 years) to build mechanisms at the state and federal levels to ensure those with pre-existing conditions get access to affordable coverage. This, in turn, will help to lower premiums for everyone else purchasing insurance on the individual market. Senators looking for middle ground might try to add even more funding to address this problem. But the two approaches to addressing pre-existing conditions represent fundamentally divergent views about the role of government, the scope of the problem and what policy is needed to solve it.

There are likely many more twists and turns in the road ahead for the effort to repeal and replace Obamacare. Some senators have even suggested they might never take up the AHCA and instead start afresh with their own legislation.

Whatever approach the Senate takes, these significant policy disagreements between Republicans must be tackled and resolved if, as conservatives have long hoped, Obamacare is to be wiped away once and for all.

The GOP's healthcare 'victory' was anything but

Scott Lemieux

Two days before the Kentucky Derby, House Republicans hit the trifecta: They used an undemocratic process to pass a healthcare bill that's awful on the merits and can only hurt them politically.

Republicans created a myth about the Affordable Care Act, claiming that Democrats rammed it through under cover of darkness. For years they mocked then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's statement that "we have to pass the bill so that you can find out what is in it." But this phrase was taken out of context: She was talking about how the news media had distorted the bill. At any rate, this story about the ACA was completely false. Democrats let the Congressional Budget Office carefully score the bill and if it was rushed it was with the slowest haste in legislative history — the process took more than a year.

Everything that Republicans said about the process that led to the ACA and worse is absolutely true, however, of Speaker Paul D. Ryan's American Health Care Act. As Republican Sen. Lindsay Graham conceded on Twitter, the bill was "finalized yesterday, has not been scored [by the CBO], amendments not allowed" and only "3 hours final debate" were permitted. Astonishingly, the people's representatives voted to radically upend the healthcare sector before a public version of the bill was even available.

There's a reason for this rushed and opaque process — you don't refuse to wait for a CBO score if you expect good news. As Pelosi said before the vote, "forcing a vote without a CBO score shows that Republicans are afraid of the facts." Indeed, it's hard to overstate how scary the facts really are.

If it becomes law, the AHCA will strip insurance coverage from millions and millions of working people while giving the upper class a massive tax cut. At the last minute, Rep. Fred Upton offered an amendment to help states reduce premiums for people with preexisting conditions — but no one who's taken either a math class or visited a doctor's office believes the amount set aside ($8 billion over five years) is nearly enough. Many people with preexisting conditions (which includes people who have sought treatment for sexual assault) will therefore be locked out of the insurance market. Meanwhile, savage cuts to Medicaid will cause many poor people to lose access to healthcare entirely. The AHCA could also eliminate caps on out-of-pocket expenses for the lucky people who get insurance through their employers, preventing them from continuing expensive treatments.

(Excuse me for not using precise numbers but, as stated, the GOP refused to allow the CBO to score the bill.)

In short, Donald Trump's promise to cover more Americans more cheaply while protecting Medicaid was a grotesque lie.

Precisely because the bill is terrible, voting to pass it will be a political disaster for the Republican Party. The first version of the bill was massively unpopular, and this version won't do much better. There simply isn't any public constituency for passing a huge cut to federal healthcare spending, causing millions to lose insurance, and giving the money to the rich. Pelosi was right that the public would like Obamacare more when they found out what was in it, because most of its components were individually popular even when the bill was not. The same isn't true of Trumpcare — virtually everything in it is unpopular. It will almost certainly cost some blue-state Republican House members their seats in 2018, and it won't help Trump's bad approval ratings either.

It's unlikely that this slapdash and morally monstrous bill will be able to pass the Senate, even in modified form. Unlikely — but not impossible. Perversely, the political hit Republicans will take for going on the record in favor of Trumpcare

might make it more likely to pass the Senate. For wavering Republicans, putting the party's House majority at serious risk and not even getting anything out of it would be the worst-case scenario.

Trumpcare would quite simply be a humanitarian nightmare, resulting in untold avoidable death and suffering for no good reason. At least it's now obvious — though it should have been obvious long ago — that Trump is not a compassionate populist and that Ryan is not a policy wonk. The fact that Republicans plan to hold a party to celebrate this great "victory" should make great fodder for midterm election attack ads.

Bloomberg

The Shame of the House Health-Care Vote

by The Editors More stories by The Editors

The dereliction of duty is breathtaking. In pushing the American Health Care Act through the House of Representatives, Speaker Paul Ryan and his Republican conference have voted to remake almost one-fifth of the U.S. economy. They did so without public hearings, without input from outside experts, without analysis by the Congressional Budget Office and without, finally, much compunction or consideration of the tens of millions of Americans it will harm.

"I don't think we should pass bills that we haven't read and don't know what they cost," Ryan said in the summer of 2009, referring (unfairly) to Obamacare. This kind of hypocrisy might be overlooked if the new bill had any merit. It doesn't.

If anything, it's more damaging than the original bill Republicans tabled in March. The CBO said that legislation would have taken away health insurance from some 24 million Americans. The new bill could push the number higher.

It would allow states to get waivers from some of the protections that the Affordable Care Act provides -- most important, the rule that says insurers cannot charge higher premiums to people with pre-existing health problems. In such states, people who let their insurance lapse for a couple of months could be charged unaffordable premiums. An amendment added on the eve of the vote is meant to soften this blow by giving states a little more money to set up "high-risk pools" for the victims. But high-risk pools -- which separate sick people from the general population and charge them higher premiums -- can't work without adequate funding. And this legislation offers hundreds of billions of dollars less than what would be needed.

Details aside, the bill would undermine health-insurance markets by increasing uncertainty for insurers who are trying to determine what plans to sell -- if any at all -- in the months ahead.

Clear thinking from leading voices in business, economics, politics, foreign affairs, culture, and more.

Why did Ryan, who rose to prominence on the wings of wonkery, force this bill through the House with only passing review? Not because it would improve anyone's welfare. One of the main attractions of the bill for Republicans is that it would cut taxes for the well-to-do. Another is that it would help Republicans escape a political dilemma of their own design: Having dissembled about Obamacare for years, the party was forced to propose its alternative. Because Republicans didn't actually have one, they had to fake it.

Ryan has achieved his goal -- passing this tainted buck to the Senate. The Senate should treat the legislation with the respect it deserves.

The New York Times

The Trumpcare Disaster - The New York Times

The Editorial Board

Protesters watched on Thursday as Republican members of the House started to head by bus to the White House to celebrate their passage of a health care bill. Gabriella Demczuk for The New York Times

The House speaker, Paul Ryan, and other Republicans falsely accused Democrats of rushing the Affordable Care Act through Congress. On Thursday, in a display of breathtaking hypocrisy, House Republicans — without holding any hearings or giving the Congressional Budget Office time to do an analysis — passed a bill that would strip at least 24 million Americans of health insurance.

Pushed by President Trump to repeal the A.C.A., or Obamacare, so he could claim a legislative win, Mr. Ryan and his lieutenants browbeat and cajoled members of their caucus to pass the bill. Groups representing doctors, hospitals, nurses, older people and people with illnesses like cancer opposed the bill. Just 17 percent of Americans supported an earlier version of the measure, and Republicans have made the legislation only worse since that poll was conducted. Neither Mr. Trump nor Mr. Ryan seemed bothered by this overwhelming criticism of their Trumpcare bill, the American Health Care Act. They seemed concerned only about appeasing the House Freedom Caucus, the far-right flank of their party.

Mr. Trump in particular has been spreading misinformation and lies about health care, arguing that the legislation would lower costs while guaranteeing that people with pre-existing health conditions could get affordable health insurance. It would do the opposite. Here is what the bill actually does:

Takes a machete to Medicaid. The bill would cut $880 billion over 10 years from Medicaid, the program that provides health care to about 74 million poor, disabled and elderly Americans. That's one-fourth of its budget. As a result, 14 million fewer people would have access to health care by 2026, according to a C.B.O. analysis of the earlier bill, which contained similar Medicaid provisions. The cuts would also hurt special education programs, which receive about $4 billion from Medicaid every year.

Slashes insurance subsidies. It would provide $300 billion less over 10 years to help people who do not get insurance through employers and have to buy their own policies. This would hurt lower-income and older people the hardest. For example, a 60-year-old living in Phoenix and earning $40,000 would have to pay an additional $12,370 a year to buy a policy, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. Many people who find themselves in this situation would have no choice but to forgo insurance.

Eliminates the individual mandate. Many people hate that the A.C.A. requires people to buy health insurance or pay a penalty. But without the mandate, fewer younger and healthier people would buy coverage. This would lead to what health experts call a "death spiral" as insurers raise rates because they are left covering people who are older and sicker, leading to even more people dropping coverage. Eventually, companies could stop selling policies directly to individuals in much of the country.

Guts protections for people with pre-existing conditions. An amendment by Representative Tom MacArthur of New Jersey would allow states to waive the requirement that insurers sell policies to people with prior health problems and not charge them higher rates. The chief executive of Blue Shield of California said the bill "could return us to a time when people who were born with a birth defect or who became sick could not purchase or afford insurance." Republicans say they will require that states with waivers offer high-risk pools and find other ways to help treat these people. The bill offers $138 billion over 10 years to help states pay for such programs. Experts say this is far too little; Larry Levitt of the Kaiser Foundation estimates it would take at least $25 billion a year.

Makes insurance less comprehensive. The bill would also let states waive a requirement under Obamacare that insurers cover a list of essential services. This means people in some places might not have access to maternity care or cancer treatment. This provision could also hurt people who get insurance through work, because federal regulations allow employers to opt into the rules of any state for the purposes of determining annual and lifetime limits on coverage, according to an analysis by the Brookings Institution.

Defunds Planned Parenthood. Republicans have included a provision that takes federal money away from the organization, which provides birth control, cancer screenings and other health services to 2.5 million people, mainly women. About 60 percent of people who use Planned Parenthood depend on government programs like Medicaid.

Despite this catalog of the bill's horrors, many Republicans have embraced it so they can claim they

fulfilled their promise to repeal Obamacare. They aren't bragging that the bill would reduce tax revenue by $880 billion over 10 years, according to the C.B.O. A vast majority of those tax cuts would go to wealthy Americans.

The bill now moves to the Senate, where several centrist Republicans are opposed to it. The best hope for defeating this legislation rests with lawmakers like Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, Susan Collins of Maine, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Rob Portman of Ohio. But Mr. Trump and far-right groups will put tremendous pressure on them to pass this dreadful bill or something similarly terrible. The health of millions of Americans is now in their hands.

Republican health bill is a dog's breakfast: Our view

The Editorial Board , USA TODAY

The Republican health care bill that passed by a 217-213 vote Thursday in the House is likely to be studied for generations as an example of how *not* to legislate.

This measure was neither subjected to hearings nor debated in committee. The non-partisan Congressional Budget Office, which estimated that a previous version would have resulted in 24 million fewer people having insurance, has not "scored" its impact. Although the plan would have life-and-death consequences and reshape a big chunk of the economy, it was slammed through after a mere three hours of debate. No effort at bipartisan compromise was attempted.

The GOP measure is both bad policy and, despite Thursday's Rose Garden celebration, bad politics. If adopted by the Senate, it would end health coverage for millions of Americans. It would also force Republicans running in competitive districts to defend a plan that ends Americans' right to buy health insurance regardless of a previous condition.

Republicans passed this dog's breakfast of a bill because they thought that they had no choice. After stirring up their base during the Obama years with repeated votes to repeal the former president's signature health plan, they reasoned they had to follow through if they were actually in a position to act.

Initially, there was too much opposition to this approach as both hard-line fiscal purists and swing-district Republicans blocked a previous version. But then President Trump jumped in to argue he couldn't afford a loss so early in his term. The pressure on rank-and-file members became overwhelming.

Obamacare, the informal name of the health law in effect since 2010, has its flaws, and the uncertainty about its future is further destabilizing the insurance market for individuals in several states. But the law is vastly superior to the Republican alternative.

Obamacare provides a right to buy comprehensive health coverage, and balances that right with an obligation to buy such coverage. These principles were lifted from a Republican bill of the 1990s that was offered as an alternative to the plan then known as Hillarycare.

The bill that passed the House on Thursday, likely to go by the name of Trumpcare, is another matter entirely. It would allow insurers to get state waivers to opt out of covering minimum benefits such as maternity care and emergency services. It would also allow insurers in those states to charge whatever they wanted for people with pre-existing conditions.

Those with serious pre-existing conditions would be put in high-risk pools, where they could apply for financial help. Only 5% of them would get such assistance, according to the consulting firm Avalere Health, because the money allotted is nowhere near enough.

There are other Dickensian provisions as well. Medicaid as we know it would come to an end, replaced by a system of grants to states that would short the program by $880 billion over the next decade. At the same time, the measure would lavish a largely wealthy population of taxpayers with $882 billion in tax breaks.

Many House Republicans now hope the Senate, which will draft its own repeal-and-replace version from scratch, will bail them out with something more palatable. But there is only one thing that can be said for what they did Thursday: For shame!

The GOP insists its healthcare bill will protect people with pre-existing conditions. It won't

The Times Editorial Board

The Times Editorial Board

About half of American adults under age 65 have at least one preexisting medical condition, by the federal government's count. According to a Kaiser Family Foundation analysis, more than half of those adults could have been denied coverage by health insurers in the days before Obamacare if they weren't included in a large employer's plan.

That's why one of the most popular and humane features of the 2010 Affordable Care Act is the provision barring insurers from discriminating against Americans with preexisting conditions. This provision not only saved many Americans from being bankrupted by medical bills, it relieved the anxiety that trapped people in jobs they would not leave for fear of losing coverage.

But now, House Republicans are proposing to let states punch a gaping hole in that safeguard as part of a bill to partially repeal and replace the ACA.

GOP leaders insist that their bill would continue to bar insurers from denying coverage to anyone, and that it would prevent them from jacking up the premiums for anyone who'd maintained continuous coverage even in states that waived the ACA's protections for those with preexisting conditions. Consumers using those states' insurance exchanges who did not maintain coverage would be eligible for subsidized state "high risk pools," where high premiums would be offset by billions of dollars in federal aid.

But far more people would be likely to face huge premium increases than the bill's supporters acknowledge. Millions of people enter and leave the state insurance exchanges annually — the turnover at Covered California is 40% to 50% — which means there may be millions of people going briefly uninsured and then facing enormous premium surcharges, if enough states dumped the ACA's protection for preexisting conditions. According to one estimate, those surcharges could range from $4,000 per year for asthmatics to $17,000 for women seeking maternity coverage to $143,000 for those with a history of metastatic cancer.

The bill's sponsors ponied up more aid Wednesday in an effort to make insurance affordable for all those Americans, but the measure's funding would fall far short of the amount needed to do so — almost $200 billion short over 10 years, even if only 5% of those in the state exchanges fell into the high risk pool, the Center for American Progress has projected. No surprise there — exorbitant costs sunk the high-risk pools that states used before the ACA, even though they excluded many applicants and denied coverage for some costly conditions.

This is the history that we left behind when the ACA was adopted, and rightly so. It would be foolish to go back now.

Republican health bill is cruel, sloppy and unmoored from rational debate.

Stephen Henderson, The Detroit Free Press

The debate over our six-year-old national health reform law is quickly

being defined not as right vs. left, or Republican vs. Democrat, but as decent vs. indecent.

That's a harsh assessment, no doubt, and one that we don't make lightly.

But the push for a hasty, ill-considered repeal of the Affordable Care Act has come almost completely unmoored from reasonable objections to the way the law has worked, or hopes to improve its advances.

This now appears to be about not much more than striking back at President Barack Obama for having championed the law in the first place, and turning the nation's back on the most vulnerable — people who were helped by the ACA's progressive accomplishments.

How else to explain the rush to end federal subsidies for Medicaid expansion, which have led to tens of millions of Americans gaining insurance coverage for the first time?

There are perfectly rational debates to be had over whether Medicaid was the best vehicle for expanded coverage for the poor. There are many other arguments to be had about whether a government mechanism or market-based solution might have been better.

But the bill that passed the House on Thursday reaches none of those deliberative points, and merely sets the clock running on a return to the days when the poorest Americans chose between health care and shelter or food, to the times when people without coverage faced bankruptcy or other financial ruin if they or their family members got sick.

That's not just sloppy — it's incredibly irresponsible.

Same with the haphazard way the new legislation deals with securing insurance for Americans with pre-existing conditions.

This week saw an incredible turn in the public debate over that issue, as the comedian Jimmy Kimmel shared on his late-night show a story about his own infant son's life-threatening, congenital condition — which, before ACA, could have caused many families to lose their insurance.

Kimmel appealed to politicians, regardless of party, to be not only reasonable, but compassionate in the way they pursue changes to ACA.

The most prominent response?

Republican Rep. Mo Brooks of Missouri crowed that the bill under consideration would "allow insurance companies to require people who have higher health care costs to contribute more to the insurance pool … thereby reducing the cost to those people who lead good lives."

It's a crass and soulless prism through which to view the health care divide in this nation. It's a perverse corollary to the idea that people who fastidiously guard their health should be rewarded. Now, thanks to GOP thinking, we may also be able to punish the unhealthy, because, well, their misfortune is clearly their own fault.

The bill on the table in Washington plays a twisted, immoral game with the issue of pre-existing conditions. Nominally, it continues protections. But it also gives states an out — if they can prove that sick people are contributing to high costs, they can charge them more. Which could, of course, lead to insurance simply being unaffordable for people with pre-existing conditions, rather than literally unattainable.

Yes indeed — money over people. That's the way to improve a health care system that already spends more per capita than any other country in the world, but produces mediocre outcomes and, until ACA, left 40 million people to fend for themselves.

The cruelty of the current reform effort was undoubtedly the impetus behind Michigan Rep. Fred Upton's announcement earlier this week that he wouldn't vote for the Republican plan. On Wednesday, after a meeting with President Trump, Upton emerged and said he had secured enough assurance — an $8-billion addition to the bill to cover people with pre-existing conditions — that he was now a "yes" on the legislation. And that's how he voted Thursday.

The GOP ranks appear increasingly crowded with members who believe poor people are to blame for their circumstances, and that the rest of us can somehow thrive while pushing them further into poverty. That's not just wrong as an economic imperative — uninsured poor people actually cost the system more than when they are covered — but it is deadly wrong as a moral construct. The callous and selfish nature of bare-knuckled, every-person-for-themselves policy has never been more accepted by the GOP's rank-and-file. It's ironic as all get out, too, because the beneficiaries of the ACA's expanded coverage are not just Democrats.

Reporting by Bridge Magazine recently detailed just how many Michigan residents in places that went heavily Republican are covered now by Medicaid, including Cheboygan County, where the number is 13%.

The GOP spent six years assailing the ACA in the most simplistic terms, because there was essentially a free pass; Obama would never have signed the changes the party sought. Trump will, so someone has to speak on behalf of decency, of not throwing the most vulnerable among us back under the health care bus.

The ACA's deepest problems have to do with the market side of it, where premiums have skyrocketed for many and where some employers have pulled away from providing employee coverage because of those costs.

Given enough time and the right framework for the discussion, there's little doubt that solutions to those issues can be found — solutions that do not ease the burden for those who have by increasing the burden for those who do not.

Upton knows this. So do the other Republicans who have pushed back against this legislation, even if they are now mouthing support.

NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

Health Care Reform No Cure for Scarcity

10-13 minutes

Our ongoing troubles with health care stem from an unwillingness to deal with certain facts. One of those facts is scarcity.

"Scarcity" is a term from economics, and it refers to the fact that there is never enough of anything to satisfy every possible desire — the universe holds only so much, and human desire has a way of outgrowing whatever we have. So we have to come up with a way of dividing up that which is scarce. We have tried many different ways of doing that — war, caste systems, central planning — though mostly we've relied on the fact that everybody wants lots of different things, which makes it possible to trade. But buying and selling stuff is not, to be sure, the only way to divide up that which is scarce.

Medical care is scarce: There are only so many doctors and hospital rooms; the pill factories can make only so many pills, and there are real limitations on the raw materials used to make those pills; heart stents don't grow on trees, but, even if they did, they would be scarce, like apples and oranges and pears and avocados.

An example: A few years ago, a friend of mine was deathly sick with a chronic cardiac condition. He learned that a doctor in another country — on another continent — had developed an experimental treatment for his condition. The chances of its working were not very high, but it had worked on others. The problem was, there were something like three doctors in the world who did that procedure, and approximately one who had done it with a great deal of success. His insurance would not pay for it, and the public-health system in his country would not even think of paying for it. But my friend was vastly wealthy, so he called up that doctor, offered him what I assume was a very large sum of money, put him on an airplane, and rented out space in the finest private hospital money could buy. Unhappily, the procedure was not successful, and he died.

We cannot offer the same level of care to everybody with the same condition. They number in the millions, and the doctors who can perform that procedure number about three. (Or, at least they did ten years ago.) Even if they worked 16-hour shifts, seven days a week — even if we pressed them into slavery — they could see only so many patients and perform so many procedures, and those would amount to a tiny fraction of the number of people who might benefit from their attention.

Because of scarcity, medical care eventually reaches the point where one of three things happens: Somebody puts out his hand and says "Pay me," an officer of the government or an insurance company refuses to approve some treatment, or you die.

Because we are a largely cooperative species, we do not like that very much. It seems unfair and unkind. So we try to make an end run around scarcity with things such as health insurance and government medical plans, both of which are based on the same economic principle: Someone else pays. But scarcity does not care who is paying: Scarcity is scarcity. In the most monopolistic public-health systems (e.g., the ones in the United Kingdom and Canada), there

is a lot of saying “No,” though it is what we might call a “Japanese no” — saying “no” without actually saying it. They put you on a waiting list and hope you die before they actually have to say “No,” or they simply expect you to accept that some services and treatments are categorically unavailable. There is a reason New York City’s hospitals are full of rich Canadians who cannot afford the free health care at home.

But a polite, indirect “No” is still a “No.” No means no.

Insurance companies say “No” all the time, and we hate them for it. That is because of another fact that we refuse to deal with like mature, responsible adults: Insurance is not a medical product — it is a financial product. Most of us do not need to spend a great deal of money on health care during any given year for most of our lives. I myself pay for most of my medical expenses out-of-pocket, and, in any given year, they rarely add up to what my health-insurance premiums cost. But I do not have health insurance, and pay premiums for that health insurance, in order to have somebody else pay for my annual check-up or routine dental work. I have insurance because I might get hit by a bus or cancer or a heart attack, and, secondarily, because one day I will be old, if I am lucky, and old people have lots of medical expenses.

Scarcity exists because of the nature of the physical universe, not because insurance executives are big meanies.

Scarcity exists because of the nature of the physical universe, not because insurance executives are big meanies. (It’s okay to hate insurance executives — everybody hates insurance executives.) Insurance companies have to say “No” a great deal, whether they are run by nice people or by the sort of people who ordinarily run insurance companies. The Canadian government health-care system is in essence a big, generous insurance company owned by its customers and perfectly happy to run large losses indefinitely, and it still has to say “No” pretty often.

Putting mandates on insurance companies is not a cure for scarcity. Sometimes, it makes things worse. Insurance companies operate by making a very careful study of actuarial information, which allows them to make remarkably accurate predictions about the medical needs of large populations with known demographic characteristics. Nobody knows whether any given 60-year-old man will have a heart attack this year, but stack up 10 million of them, and the pointy-headed actuarial nerds can tell you with a high degree of accuracy how many of them will. But we want insurance to be something different: We want it to be the conqueror of scarcity. So we do things like mandate coverage of preexisting medical conditions, which is to say, we demand that they place bets against things that already have happened. The usual metaphor here is offering fire insurance after the house already has burned down, and that is apt. We are asking them to bet against the Patriots in the 2017 Super Bowl after the fact, in 2018, in 2019, 2020, etc.

What might a health-care program that deals with reality look like?

We could probably lower the cost of prescription drugs significantly by making the approval process less cumbrous and expensive, and maybe by tweaking a few intellectual-property procedures. We could do the same with medical devices and the like, though the so-called Affordable Care Act took the opposite approach, taxing those devices and making them scarcer. If we want more doctors, there are probably 1 million top-shelf physicians from around the world who would immigrate to the United States yesterday if we gave them the go-ahead. (Yes, that probably would lower the incomes of native-born doctors; we are going to be adults for the moment, and this is a question of trade-offs.) We could reduce the regulatory burden on insurance companies in an effort to lure more of them into the market, whereas the ACA added to their burdens and drove many of them from the marketplace.

We could try to make ordinary, non-emergency medical care more of an ordinary product, one that people pay for the way they pay for food and housing and cars and *World of Warcraft* expansion packs.

We could try to make ordinary, non-emergency medical care more of an ordinary product, one that people pay for the way they pay for food and housing and cars and *World of Warcraft* expansion packs and the other necessities of modern life, allowing insurance to be insurance: a financial product that helps to mitigate certain risks related to unexpected health-care costs. This would allow for the emergence of robust, competitive, consumer-oriented markets like we have in cellphones and pornography and other innovative markets where choices abound and prices keep going down because the consumer is king.

But there will be scarcity. Somebody will put his hand out and say, “Pay me.”

This brings up something economists call “elasticity of demand.” That is a fancy way of saying that when you roll into the local BMW dealer and find out that that i8 costs $150,000, you say, “No, thanks,” and you get a Honda Civic instead, but when you are rolled into the emergency room with a broken leg or a non-functioning heart, you don’t talk about prices at all, and, even if you did, you aren’t normally going to say “No” to any price when the alternative is sickness and pain and death. But not every medical procedure is a life-and-death matter, and, even in the matter of serial chronic conditions such as diabetes, there is opportunity for comparison shopping and negotiating. The other kind of medical problem is why you have insurance.

We have perfectly functional markets in all sorts of life-and-death goods. They expect you to pay up at the grocery store, too, but poor people are not starving in the American streets, because we came up with this so-crazy-it-just-might-work idea of giving poor people money and money analogues (such as food stamps) to pay for food. It is not a perfect system, but it is preferable, as we know from unhappy experiences abroad, to having the government try to run the farms, as government did in the Soviet Union, or the grocery stores, as government does in hungry, miserable Venezuela. The Apple Store has its shortcomings, to be sure, but I’d rather have a health-care system that looks like the Apple Store than one that looks like a Venezuelan grocery store.

There is a certain libertarian tendency to look at messes such as the Affordable Care Act and the American Health Care Act and throw up one’s hands, exclaiming: “Just let markets work!” We should certainly let markets work, but not “just.” We aren’t going to let children with congenital birth defects suffer just because they might have stupid and irresponsible parents, and we are not going to let old people who have outlived their retirement savings die of pneumonia because we don’t want to spend a couple of thousand bucks treating them. But we also do not have a society in which everybody is on Section 8 and food stamps, nor do we want one. Developing sensible, intelligently run, reasonably generous welfare programs for those who cannot or simply have not done it for themselves is a relatively small project, but trying to have government impose some kind of political discipline on the entirety of the health-care system — which is as explicit a part of the current daft Republican health-care program as it is of Obamacare — is a different kind of project entirely.

Scarcity is not an economic theory. You can experience it for yourself any time you like, on a desert island or the streets of New York City. It is an aspect of reality, and the health-care reformers eventually will have to get around to taking reality into consideration.

The New York Times

The Real Problem With the Health Care Bill

Theresa Brown

In contrast, the thrust of the Republican bill is to lower the cost of insurance by removing the guarantees of the A.C.A. States would be able to exempt any of the essential health benefits from insurance mandates, and they would also be allowed to exclude patients with pre-existing conditions. Millions are likely to lose their health insurance, but the young and generally healthy would pay much lower premiums.

In short, the two plans are not different takes on the same problem. They are different takes on different problems.

And the two problems are not equal concerns. Yes, the price of insurance is an issue — though a properly designed plan will at least move most of those costs off individuals and small businesses and onto the government’s shoulders.

Access to quality care, in contrast, is literally a matter of life and death (and, of course, costs to those no longer covered). And not just for the newly uninsured. One principle behind the Republican plan is that patients, as consumers, should pay only for what they need: The sick need more coverage and so pay more (possibly with a small amount of federal subsidies), and vice versa for the healthy.

Here's the flaw in the logic: Broadly speaking, "sick" and "healthy" are not fixed qualities. The whole idea behind insurance is that anyone healthy can get sick, and so everyone should have the same coverage. When the H1N1 flu virus struck a few years ago, many of the sickest patients were otherwise reasonably healthy adults, who survived only because of intensive care, often costing well over $5,000 a day.

I think we would all agree that such care is worth what it costs, though, since essentially healthy people went to the hospital dangerously ill and left restored. The A.C.A. mandates such coverage, even though it means everyone's insurance will be more expensive. The cheaper, non-comprehensive insurance policies allowed by the new Republican health care bill might not cover such situations.

There's one other problem with the Republican plan. It promises to reduce the price of insurance, and it may do that for some people. But it won't make much of a dent in the overall price of health care, because it doesn't deal with the fundamental reasons it is so expensive: the profit-driven nature of the system.

For better or (mostly) worse, the American health care industry is a largely for-profit sector. Health care is expensive because companies have to charge more to maintain revenue. That doesn't mean that everyone in the industry is greedy, though as Elisabeth Rosenthal documents in her new book "An American Sickness," it's hard not to see greed in billing practices designed to maximize profit. Health care profiteering also depends on exorbitant prices for medical equipment and deceptive marketing for expensive brand-name drugs. In any case, these profit-focused aspects of health care do nothing to improve care and arguably make it worse, because they focus time and resources on revenue generation rather than on patients.

In this context, the new Republican health care plan is a ruse: Less pricey health insurance that does not actually make health care less expensive, while eliminating the Obamacare protections, is likely to cause millions of Americans to lose their health insurance altogether.

Every other industrialized country offers health care that is cheaper and better, because they use government controls to balance revenue generation and the costs of meeting patients' needs.

If Republicans really want cheaper insurance policies to equal quality care, then they need to guarantee coverage, and make that affordable by reining in health care profits. Because getting cheaper insurance at the expense of endangering one's life is not a health care bargain.

POLITICO

Even red states are wary of ditching Obamacare protections

By Rachana Pradhan

The House Republican repeal bill narrowly approved Thursday lets states opt out of much of Obamacare — but not a single governor has stepped up to say they want to take advantage of that leeway.

Officials in a dozen states surveyed by POLITICO weren't eager to embrace opt-outs that would let states skirt key insurance provisions, including safeguards for people with pre-existing conditions and a set of basic, required health benefits.

That reticence is striking given that "state flexibility" has been at the top of the governors' health care wish lists for years. It shows the political peril of endorsing a concept that could spike premiums and risk coverage for the sick, including some with life-threatening or disabling conditions.

Once the dust settles — assuming the American Health Care Act makes it through the Senate and eventually reaches President Donald Trump's desk — that could change, particularly in red states that have been most hostile to Obamacare. Should these Obamacare exemptions survive in the Senate version, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Texas, Tennessee and Wisconsin are among those seen as the most likely to pursue them. Governors' spokesmen declined comment in several of those states.

But for now, state officials are holding back. Governors run the risk of being blamed for abandoning patients with pre-existing conditions if they grab any of these exemptions.

"If you are a state or a governor or an insurance commissioner and you want to start doing this … it's a microcosm of what Congress is experiencing now," said Christopher Koller, a former insurance commissioner who heads the Milbank Memorial Fund. "There's a lot of moving parts. You make [insurance] cheaper for younger people, you make it more expensive for older people."

Even backers of the legislation in Congress don't expect many states to take up the options.

"I would guess that most governors, maybe all, don't know, will not seek a waiver," said Rep. Fred Upton (R-Mich.), who wrote the amendment adding more money to the bill that was seen as the key to its eventual passage.

Upton's home state of Michigan isn't interested, he said, based on his conversations with Republican Gov. Rick Snyder. Snyder's office didn't respond to a request for comment.

Under the House bill, states could request federal permission to get out of three major Obamacare standards. Starting in 2019, Obamacare's ban on charging sick people more — known as community rating — could be lifted in states that set up a separate coverage program for people with pre-existing conditions. Another option would let states set their own minimum benefit standards in 2020. A third waiver starting next year would let insurers charge older customers more than five times as much as younger enrollees for the same plan.

Republicans are setting aside $138 billion in their repeal bill to help state insurance marketplaces, including $23 billion to fund programs for people with pre-existing conditions in states that take these opt-outs. Several independent analyses have found funding levels would fall well short of what's needed to actually protect sick patients.

Democrats fear more states would waive insurance rules as Republicans succumb to pressure to lower premiums for healthy people rather than protecting the sick, as the individual market largely operated before the Affordable Care Act.

"I think it might take time for things to get back to that pre-ACA status quo, but I actually think the best evidence we have is what states did when we were in this situation before," said Aviva Aron-Dine with the left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. "What they are faced with is intense pressure to bring premiums down for healthy people. And they know it's coming at the expense of sick people, but that pressure can just become insurmountable."

The exemptions from insurance rules could factor into upcoming gubernatorial races. More than a dozen GOP governors are term-limited next year, and roughly just as many face re-election.

Rep. Jim Renacci, who is vying to succeed John Kasich as Ohio governor in 2018, on Thursday wouldn't commit to seeking exemptions.

"I don't know if Ohio will even be able to qualify to get it done," Renacci said on CNN. "But I would look at it."

Regulators who oversee insurance markets in red states — home to some of Obamacare's biggest antagonists — expressed concern that the House plan would drive up costs for seniors and people with pre-existing conditions.

Allowing insurers to charge sick people more would be "problematic" for people with chronic conditions, said Mike Rhoads, an official in Oklahoma's Insurance Department. However, he said Oklahoma — where Obamacare rates have skyrocketed in recent years — may look to trim some benefit mandates. But he said the state isn't seriously examining any exemptions, citing uncertainty about expected changes to the repeal bill.

"I think we're waiting to see what really is going to happen here," he said.

Some state officials also said they are wary of allowing older enrollees to be charged much more for coverage. Mississippi Insurance Commissioner Mike Chaney, a Republican, doesn't find the option appealing. "It would penalize the people who need insurance the most," he said.

In Alaska, which is already seeking federal funds to stabilize its individual market, insurance regulators did not say if they would pursue additional changes. Even in Tennessee, where portions of the state may not have any coverage options next year, top insurance official Julie McPeak expressed only tepid support for the idea.

"I support any flexibility granted to the states to address the needs of our market," McPeak said in an emailed statement before the Thursday House vote. However, she said the state needs more information, especially about funding.

Very few states would likely grab exemptions immediately. The timeline is “very ambitious” and would require a state to have a “really forward-thinking governor” said Mia Heck, who heads the American Legislative Exchange Council’s health task force. Her group, which has fought Obamacare implementation in the states, is developing model legislation that would empower governors to seek exemptions from Obamacare requirements.

“The timing for this is not great for implementation at the state level,” she said.

Obamacare repeal would give wealthy even more of a tax break

*(CNN)*To understand what today's news of the House voting to repeal and not quite replace Obamacare really means, let's think back to World War II for a moment.

The federal government was worried about war-time inflation, and so proposed wage and price controls. Labor unions objected. To satisfy workers, the National War Labor Board agreed to exempt employer-provided health care from both wage controls and income tax.

That tax benefit was supposed to be temporary. Nearly 75 years is a lot of "temporary."

The tax break for employer-provided health care is worth more the higher one's income tax rate, which means it is worth nothing at all to the bottom half of the population, which doesn't have a positive income tax rate.

The break has led to a world in which the well-paid and well-employed are well-insured, and the marginally employed -- lower-pay workers, part-time and temp workers, the rest of the roughly 30 million Americans under the age of 65 in this category -- still have no health insurance.

Flash forward to today. The non-taxation of employer-provided health care is a tax break worth $250 billion a year, nearly $3 trillion over a 10-year period, to the top half. Were we to repeal this tax break, alone, America could more than pay to insure all uninsured Americans with the resulting revenues.

What does this have to do with today's news?

Today, the House, aided and abetted by President Trump, did not vote to change, repeal or limit the tax break for health insurance for the upper half of Americans, in order to continue Obamacare's promise to bring health care to all.

Instead, the House, aided and abetted by President Trump, voted to cut taxes on the upper half in order to seriously gut the promise of universal health care.

As it happens, the taxes cut were only a third of the value of the tax break that was not changed (roughly $900 billion compared to $2.7 trillion).

In sum, the top earners get to keep their full $250 billion a year of health care tax breaks, the thing that was supposed to be temporary.

The people at the top also get back the $80 billion in taxes they were paying to help the people at the bottom of the income scale get some insurance, the thing that was supposed to be permanent. (Among these taxes are increases in Medicare charges and a 3.8 percent additional tax on investment income, both being collected exclusively from individuals earning $200,000 or families earning $250,000 or more annually.)

These are taxpaying households that have benefited and continue to benefit significantly from tax-free healthcare.

That only sounds inconsistent, until one sees who wins every time: the top.

The fundamental things apply.

And so now, looking to the future, death may be coming sooner to some after today's news, as 24 million more might join the rolls of the uninsured. But it seems like Americans can all count on this fundamental thing applying: Trump, Ryan and like-minded Republicans everywhere will work their hardest to get rid of death taxes, so that the heirs of billionaires will never, ever, have to worry about paying taxes again.

Health and taxes may be forever joined at the hip for the most fortunate Americans, and soon the tax man won't even be calling to disturb the billionaires' blissful peace.

The values clash behind Republican health-care reform

The Christian Science Monitor

May 4, 2017 Washington— Republicans, who today narrowly won a House vote aimed at dismantling key parts of Obamacare, have opened themselves up to being cast as heartless by political foes and many constituents. Experts estimate that the legislation would result in lost or reduced coverage for millions of Americans.

So why has the GOP pushed forward? Partly, of course, it’s the politics of a highly polarized era. But another prominent factor is lawmakers’ guiding principles.

As Republicans look at a health-care system that’s imposing ever higher costs on both average Americans and on the federal budget, they argue that principles like free-market competition and consumer choice could prove vital to making health care more affordable and accessible. In tandem, other conservative values are being championed: limited government, turning power back to the states, and curbing federal deficits.

And they are impassioned about it.

Rep. Dave Brat (R) of Virginia calls freedom the “ultimate American value” and says “that value produced the best pharmaceutical system, the best hospital system, the best insurance system, the best everything.”

The nation’s challenges with spiraling health costs, Representative Brat says, are rooted in over-regulation by the federal government. “We’re ruining it,” he says, as “everything in the world is run out of this city.”

Although those views generally resonate across the Republican base, the GOP effort will face a values test as the bill faces a tougher path in the Senate – and increased public scrutiny. Freedom is one bedrock value for Americans, but not the only one.

And health care, more than most issues, hinges around questions of compassion: In the case of this bill, is it right that as many as 24 million Americans could lose their coverage?

More basically, constituents are asking themselves how it will affect their pocketbook and their health.

Late-night TV host Jimmy Kimmel struck a chord with many Americans with a monologue Monday night that went viral online, telling viewers why he had missed a string of shows – that his newborn son had undergone surgery after doctors diagnosed a rare condition which they said was life-threatening.

"No parent should ever have to decide if they can afford to save their child’s life," he said. "It just shouldn’t happen. Not here.”

Varied views among Republicans

President Trump railed against the Affordable Care Act, known as ACA or Obamacare, during the election campaign. But he also promised to improve coverage for Americans.

Shrinking government, shifting care for the poor (Medicaid) toward the states, and loosening federal mandates on insurance are all top priorities for most Republicans in Congress – especially those in the Freedom Caucus wing that rejected an earlier version of the bill as too liberal.

Yet lawmakers also know their constituents have very immediate concerns on their minds: What will happen to their coverage, their premiums, their out-of-pocket costs? Party moderates are concerned about striking the right balance.

“I think everybody in this country should have access to affordable health-care coverage. And I think that a policy that ensures that if you have preexisting conditions you will not face price discrimination is essential,” Rep. Ryan Costello, from a Pennsylvania a swing district outside Philadelphia, said in an interview on May 2. He voted against the bill on Thursday.

Key points in the legislation

Although labeled by Republicans as a key step toward “repeal and replace,” the bill leaves much of Obamacare intact. It does, however, make major changes that critics say the result would be to undercut the viability of state-level marketplaces (exchanges) for buying insurance and to reduce Medicaid coverage by 14 million people.

Key points in the legislation include:

- Removing the tax penalty on individuals who do not sign up for minimum insurance.
- Maintaining the requirement that insurers

grant policies regardless of medical history, but allowing waivers for states to set up “high-risk pools” for people with pre-existing conditions. (Federal subsidies would help cover people in those pools.)

- Adjusting subsidies and the regulation of premiums so that insurance becomes more affordable for young people but costlier for older people.

- Cut about $880 billion from Medicaid by shifting toward a per capita allotment and giving states greater responsibility.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO), looking at an earlier version of the plan, estimated it would reduce federal deficits by $337 billion over the coming decade, but would leave 14 million more Americans uninsured in 2018 and 24 million by 2026. Most of the initial 14 million would come from people opting out of the individual mandate, the CBO said.

Democrats say the bill turns its back on principles most Americans embrace.

“We believe – in the values debate – that health care is a right for all Americans, not just a privilege for the few,” House minority leader Nancy Pelosi (D) of California said recently. “Here they are – giving a tax break. And ironically, many of the people who will lose their health care voted for President Trump, live in red areas. Much of the money that will go to richest people in America are in blue areas. Now, isn’t that something?”

As the vote was being taken Thursday, the Democratic leadership said the bill will also endanger the quality of employer-based health plans, by allowing employers to choose the benefit requirements from any state, including ones that might lower their benchmarks under a waiver.

Even after passing the House 217-213 on May 4, the road ahead in the Senate is uncertain.

Moderate Sen. Susan Collins (R) of Maine has co-authored a bill with fellow Republican Sen. Bill Cassidy of Louisiana, who is a doctor. Their bill would allow states that want to keep the ACA to be able to keep it, while others could take ACA money and use it to increase health care coverage.

Where many Republicans promote “universal access” to affordable insurance rather than the goal of universal coverage, the effort by these two senators may reflect how Obamacare has shifted America’s goalposts on that point.

“Affordability and access have always been key Republican values when it comes to designing a health care system,” Senator Collins said in a recent interview. “There is increasing awareness that those two issues are linked to coverage and that if you don’t have insurance, access is going to be more limited.” She said “one of our goals is to expand coverage and help reduce the 30 million Americans who are still uncovered despite years of the Affordable Care Act.”

Delegating power to the states

Even to some health-care experts who are fans of conservative-style reform, it looks like Republicans are still feeling their way on how to blend free markets and fiscal discipline with widespread coverage and security.

But conservative experts on health policy say that implementing more competitive markets, consumer choice, and empowerment for states could make a positive difference. Today health care accounts for nearly one-fifth of the nation’s economy, a proportion that is rising.

In many ways, the debate over what to do about rising costs centers around just how different health care is from other goods and services. Most consumer choices don’t have life-or-death implications, but conservatives say that doesn’t mean the task of providing care needs to become increasingly government-driven.

Paul Howard, a health policy expert at the Manhattan Institute in New York, sees value in the ideal – dating back to the drafting of the Constitution – of delegating much to the states, which are already in the business of regulating the industry.

“We need to give incentives for those markets to work as well as possible … to encourage competition,” Mr. Howard says. “Federalism could allow blue and red states to have their experiments within a common fiscal framework.”

Other options for controlling costs

Across the spectrum of policy experts, however, many are skeptical of how big a role consumer choice can play. One Republican goal has been to lop off some of the elements that basic insurance plans must include, for instance, and then let people choose if they want to add additional coverage.

“A whole bunch of people didn't think they need mental health care” (something included in Obamacare-compliant health plans), until a need arose, says Gary Claxton of the Kaiser Family Foundation, which focuses on health-care research.

He and other experts say competition has been diminished by a trend of hospital consolidation.

But many experts see other avenues for cost control, including a nascent shift toward “bundled payment” for each episode of care, rather than letting providers charge incremental fees for each test or service.

And although government regulation is anathema to Republican values, it has been used to bring down the cost of everything from prescription drugs to medical procedures. “Compared to other countries we regulate far fewer prices,” says Mr. Claxton.

Where's the empathy for black poverty and pain?

*(CNN)*In the 1890s, sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois noticed something disturbing about how Americans viewed the plight of blacks in Philadelphia who had suffered through unsanitary living conditions, high rates of consumption and back-breaking labor.

"The most difficult social problem in the matter of Negro health is the peculiar attitude of the nation toward the well-being of the race," he wrote. "There have, for instance, been few other cases in the history of civilized peoples where human suffering has been viewed with such peculiar indifference."

That indifference toward the well-being of blacks, and to a larger extent, people of color in the United States, arguably continues today, particularly in how the media frames the struggles of whites who are suffering from suicide and drug abuse at record rates.

President Donald Trump won his campaign, in part, on the promise of bringing hope back to "the silent majority," a large swath of mainly white working-class Americans who feel they have been left behind by trade policies like NAFTA and have watched their manufacturing jobs disappear.

But the administration's rhetoric about blacks, Muslims and Latinos has focused mostly on crime in the "inner cities," "criminal aliens" attacking native-born Americans and "radical Islamic terrorism" as the scourge of our nation. The economic anxiety facing black and brown workers, while arguably more profound, has been largely sidelined.

In a CNN/Kaiser poll taken before the election, 63% of white working-class respondents said they were satisfied with their personal financial situation, compared to just 40% of black working-class respondents. Both groups were overwhelmingly dissatisfied with the country's economic situation.

Researchers at Princeton University recently found that whites without a college degree, many of whom are saddled with high unemployment, consumed with addiction and with the fabric of their families fraying, are killing themselves in so-called "deaths of despair."

Yet, by most measures, whites are still better off than black and brown Americans -- they have more wealth on average and they are likely to be paid more, even with less experience and education than their black counterparts. In 2013, white households in the US had a median wealth of $144,200 -- almost 13 times the median wealth of black households at $11,200. And the CNN/Kaiser poll showed that while 19% of whites without a college degree had earned more than $90,000 in income, just 6% of blacks without a college degree had earned that level of income.

Even though the poverty gap between blacks and whites has narrowed, a Pew study released last year found that blacks were still at least twice as likely as whites to live in poverty or be unemployed. Blacks were also more likely to have sought food from a food bank than whites were.

Focus is on white working class, their challenges

Today's empathy gap in how we view white poverty and black poverty is partly the result of the overwhelming, and arguably sympathetic, focus on white working-class Americans by both

the media and the current administration.

Consider the popularity of the podcast "S-Town," where "race has a weird, sideways manner of appearing," among its poor, white protagonists, wrote Wesley Jenkins for Buzzfeed.

An empathy gap also exists in how we view the opioid addiction crisis that has gripped the nation, particularly among white males. I recall growing up in public housing in New York City and seeing heroin and crack ravage our largely poor black and Latino community. Back then, the drug epidemic was considered a crime to be eradicated, rather than a public health issue to be handled with compassion.

To be sure, poor white Americans are facing a serious crisis, but blacks who still lag far behind them in key metrics of economic success, are rarely seen as deserving of such empathy.

"Most Americans believe that racism is in the past and that it's individual, not structural," said David R. Williams, a professor of public health, African-American studies and sociology at Harvard University. "They believe that the problems minority Americans have are problems they created themselves."

The racialization of poverty in the media began to take shape in the 1970s and 80s, when blacks became the face of government assistance programs like welfare, said Charlton McIlwain, an associate professor of media, culture and communication at New York University. Previous government programs like The New Deal were meant to help poor white Americans "who had lost their economic way" and were struggling after the Great Depression, said McIlwain.

Contrast that with Ronald Regan's oft-invoked trope of the "welfare queen," the black woman who supposedly leeches off of the government for her own needs and "black poverty had come to be seen as associated with laziness, criminality and violence" said McIlwain.

For whites, poverty is a "failure of the system," with a narrative that says, "You've done all you can, you've worked hard and here you are with no safety net," said McIlwain. Blacks and other people of color are viewed as "getting what they deserve for being lazy, for being criminals, for not picking themselves up by their bootstraps."

Empathy gaps exist beyond poverty, too. Studies have shown black men are often perceived as bigger, stronger and scarier than white men, even if they are the same size. And additional research has shown that black boys are seen as older and less innocent than their white counterparts. Criminal justice is also rife with empathy gaps. Blacks are more likely to be wrongfully convicted than whites and are also likely to spend longer in prison before being exonerated for their crimes.

When aspirations collapse

In her play "Sweat," Pulitzer Prize winner Lynn Nottage examines the town of Reading, Pennsylvania, which lost its manufacturing plant in the early 2000s and the jobs that came with it. Suddenly, white and black residents who once had solid working-class lives and middle-class aspirations find themselves confronting poverty, drug addiction, incarceration -- and each other.

"White poverty is seen as different, even though there's a certain swath of the population that's been experiencing a certain level of deprivation for a very long time," Nottage told me in a brief interview after a recent performance of the play.

Nottage leans in to questions about race and class when one of the characters, a Latino bar back, crosses the picket line to work at the plant for less than the union workers make but more than his current job pays. In another scene, a black woman gets promoted to management, much to the chagrin of her white co-workers. Both characters defend their positions in economic terms: they need the money because black and brown workers have historically been kept out of higher paying jobs.

Despite their documented advantages, data from the General Social Survey at the University of Chicago show that over the past few decades whites have grown increasingly less optimistic than blacks about their ability to improve their standard of living. In 2016, 53% of whites said they were optimistic about their prospects, compared to 62% of blacks. (In 1987, 73% of whites said they were optimistic about their ability to improve their standard of living compared to 67% of blacks.)

Follow CNN Opinion

Join us on Twitter and Facebook

Pessimism among whites appears to have increased around the Great Recession, said Jennifer Benz, a principal research scientist and the deputy director of The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. While the recession "hit blacks worse than it hit whites," Benz said, whites may have felt that they "were falling from a higher place."

Closing the empathy gap will not come easy. "The empathy gap exists because whites frequently lack any real connection to nonwhites and therefore don't see them as 'one of us'," said McIllwain of NYU. Moving past that "requires deep engagement with people at the personal and community level." But our country's continued segregation in schools, workplaces and religious institutions will make that a challenge, said McIlwain.

Instead, we could focus on fairness in how our institutions treat black and white Americans, said McIlwain. Lawmakers, police officers, and judges must be willing to correct disparities in arrests, incarceration, sentencing and funding for drug treatment. "Then they must ask themselves what role they may have played in contributing to those disparities, and then be willing to correct that which is in our power," said McIlwain. "This takes less empathy than it does sheer will."

NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

Trump's Religious Liberty Executive Order Is a Failure

Fresh on the heels of a budget deal that fully funds Planned Parenthood, Donald Trump has signed a religious-liberty executive order that — if reports are correct — is constitutionally dubious, dangerously misleading, and ultimately harmful to the very cause that it purports to protect. In fact, he should tear it up, *not* start over, and do the actual real statutory and regulatory work that truly protects religious liberty.

According to the *New York Times* and others privy to the administration's preview, the order has three main components: 1) a promise to "protect and vigorously promote religious liberty," 2) a directive to "ease restrictions on political activity by churches and charities," and 3) an order to "federal agencies to exempt some religious organizations from Affordable Care Act requirements that provide employees with health coverage for contraception." Those directives are respectively 1) meaningless, 2) dangerous, and 3) meaningless.

(Update: the text of Trumps's executive order is available, and it reflects the content described by the *Times*.)

Let's dispense first with the vague and sweeping promise to "protect and vigorously promote religious liberty." That's a nice sentiment, but it's proven only by *actions*, and if the order itself is considered one of those actions, then it's self-refuting. The order doesn't do anything "vigorously," and it doesn't "protect" anything at all.

Next — and this is important to understand — an executive order cannot repeal a statute, and legal restrictions on political activity by churches are statutory. They're part of the so-called Johnson Amendment, a rarely enforced provision of the tax code that prohibits 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organizations from, as the IRS explains, "directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective public office."

The Johnson Amendment is constitutionally problematic (to put it mildly). Lyndon Johnson rammed it through Congress for the noble purpose of stopping nonprofits from supporting his primary opponent and preserving his own political hide, and it's been on the books ever since. Though it's rarely enforced, it hangs like the Sword of Damocles over the heads not just of churches but of every 501(c)(3) in the United States. First Amendment lawyers are desperate to find a good test case to challenge it, but the IRS's general lack of enforcement means that the right case is elusive. So the amendment remains.

The answer to the Johnson Amendment, however, is to either repeal the statute or overturn it in court. This order does neither. In fact, a lawyer will commit malpractice if he tells a pastor or director of a nonprofit that this order allows a church or nonprofit to use its resources to support or oppose a candidate. Even if the Trump administration chooses not to enforce the law, a later administration can tear up Trump's order and begin vigorous enforcement based on actions

undertaken during the Trump administration.

Imagine, for example, that churches rely on this order to mobilize support for Trump in his 2020 reelection campaign. Imagine he loses to Kamala Harris. Then, suddenly, churches across the land would be instantly vulnerable to IRS enforcement action. Thinking they were protected, churches would find themselves in the worst of predicaments, with their rights and possibly even existences dependent on the capricious mercies of the federal courts.

Even worse, to the extent the Trump administration is using its "prosecutorial discretion" not to enforce the Johnson Amendment, how is that any different from the Obama administration's decision to use its alleged prosecutorial discretion not to enforce immigration laws? Legislative problems demand legislative or judicial solutions.

The order's last reported provision, a promise to "exempt some religious organizations" from the contraception mandate, is just as vague and meaningless as the order's promise to vigorously protect religious freedom. Just as executive orders can't overturn statutes, they also can't overturn regulations, and the contraception mandate is on the regulatory books.

Congress can *right now* work to pass statutes that protect free speech and rights of conscience. That's the real work of government. Anything else is fluff.

Finally, the order is just as notable for what it omits as for what it reportedly includes. While the Johnson Amendment is important, its threat to religious freedom pales in comparison to the comprehensive assault on religious organizations on federally funded campuses, the threats to the religious freedom of Christian educational institutions, and the attack on the rights of conscience of dissenters from the new orthodoxies on marriage, the family, and even the definition of male and female. What will the administration do to protect religious freedom when the entire cultural Left mobilizes against it? We still don't know.

The administration can *right now* begin the rulemaking process to change the contraception mandate. Congress can *right now* begin the lawmaking process to repeal the Johnson Amendment. Congress can *right now* work to pass statutes that protect free speech and rights of conscience. That's the real work of government. Anything else is fluff, a symbol at best.

Trump's strongest move for life and liberty has been the nomination of an outstanding Supreme Court justice, but let's be clear — a religious-liberty policy that depends mainly on nominating judges and hoping that they do the right thing is a half-measure at best and a fool's errand at worst. The story of the Supreme Court of the last 40 years is largely of major battles lost and high hopes dashed. In the modern administrative state, the work of government is conducted through sweeping statutes and regulations that no one can count on a court to overturn. To guarantee protections for religious liberty, you write those protections into *law*, you don't wish-cast them through executive orders.

While there is no one single reason why Donald Trump won the presidency, this much I do know: If Evangelical voters had not turned out in mass numbers, he would be sitting in New York right now plotting the comeback of Trump Steaks. It's time for those Evangelical leaders who jumped on the Trump Train, the ones who are now oh-so-close to that coveted "room where it happens," to speak with a single, united voice. Tell the president that the nation's first liberty demands more respect — and more protection — than the dangerous nothingness of this executive order.

Los Angeles Times

Trump exaggerates a threat to religious freedom

The Times Editorial Board

The Times Editorial Board

As a candidate for president, Donald Trump embraced the mistaken view that the federal government was violating religious freedom by prohibiting churches — and other organizations that received the benefit of a tax exemption — from endorsing candidates for public office. On Thursday, President Trump seemed prepared to do something about that.

Gathering religious leaders in the Rose Garden, he announced that he would be signing a document that would restore their voice. "For too long, the federal government has used the power of the state as a weapon against people of faith…," the president said, associating himself with the persecution complex that afflicts some on the religious right. "You are now in a position where you can say what you want to say."

Fortunately, and not for the first time, there was less to a Trump promise than met the eye. The president's "Executive Order Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty" turns out to be mostly a restatement of the legal status quo combined with some ringing rhetoric about the importance of religious freedom. It doesn't reverse the ban on churches endorsing candidates that is contained in a 1954 law known as the Johnson Amendment (which isn't aggressively enforced in any case). Rather, it directs the IRS to evaluate political expression by religious nonprofits using the same criteria it employs for judging expression by nonreligious tax-exempt groups.

Although Trump's order doesn't go as far as some feared, it still is troubling. It sends the message that the IRS won't be held accountable by this administration for continuing to turn a blind eye to even blatant examples of politicking by churches and other religious organizations.

The Johnson Amendment is not terribly restrictive. It doesn't bar members of the clergy from sermonizing about issues from poverty to climate change to terrorism, or from endorsing candidates in their personal capacities. Rather, it tells churches (and other nonprofits) that if they seek a tax exemption — which can be worth millions of dollars — they must refrain from a small subset of political speech. The underlying principle is that when the taxpayers provide a financial benefit to charitable organizations, they shouldn't be asked to subsidize political views with which they might disagree.

Trump is on record as saying that he wants to "totally destroy the Johnson Amendment." If he were to persuade Congress to repeal the law, the effects could extend beyond priests and preachers issuing endorsements from the pulpit. Churches could become major factors in the financing of political campaigns and conduits for unaccountable special-interest political contributions. That would be bad for both politics and religion.

NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

Trump's Religious Liberty Executive Order: Symbolic Half Measure

---

In response to the ongoing federal assault upon Americans' religious liberties, President Donald Trump has responded with an executive order that will entrust these liberties to the discretion of IRS agents.

Maybe this one needs a bit more thought.

President Trump had promised wide-ranging executive action on religious liberty, including protections for religious organizations whose beliefs and practices potentially put them on the wrong side of laws meant to protect gays from employment discrimination. In what has become a familiar pattern, the president over-promised and under-delivered. What he is offering up instead is a vague and unworkable mishmash of executive direction that has the potential to make the problem worse.

First, the president purports to, as he put it, "get rid of and totally destroy the Johnson Amendment," a law that forbids tax-exempt religious organizations to endorse or oppose candidates from the pulpit. While religious organizations already enjoy the right to advocate and agitate in the political arena, the Johnson Amendment represents a free-speech restriction that is almost certainly unconstitutional, at odds with a tradition of First Amendment jurisprudence barring the linkage of government benefits to the restriction of unrelated constitutional rights. The problem, which President Trump does not quite seem to comprehend, is that an executive order cannot simply overturn a piece of legislation. As Gregory S. Baylor of Alliance Defending Freedom puts it, "A legislative problem like the Johnson Amendment demands a legislative solution like the Free Speech Fairness Act." But President Trump has thus far shown very little appetite for taking a specific legislative agenda to Congress — and to the public — and fighting for it.

Instead, President Trump will initiate President Barack Obama's

approach to illegal immigrants and simply order that "prosecutorial discretion" be expanded and codified in such a way as to categorically forbid enforcing federal law. Given the recent history of the IRS and its willful harassment of conservative groups, we are skeptical that this will prove a fruitful approach. We are still more skeptical that such an approach would last five minutes should another Democrat end up in the White House, which, alas, is bound to happen some day, and which would leave churches vulnerable to future sanction for deeds done under the assumption that the prosecutors would be permanently sidelined. We are entirely unconvinced that this is a substitute for changing the law.

Federal discretion is a fickle thing. Consider the case of the West Michigan Beef Company, a small, family-owned firm being harassed by the federal government for distributing traditional-marriage literature in its own facility. The USDA has threatened to shut the business down over its advertising of its owners' "offensive" religious ideas on their own property. The order under consideration does nothing to constrain such abuses. It amounts to very little more than a temporary president telling a permanent bureaucracy, "I'd rather you not do that."

It does purport to provide "regulatory relief" to businesses with owners who object to the Affordable Care Act's contraceptive mandate, a regulation that remains in full force. With a Supreme Court decision on its side (in *Hobby Lobby*), the administration surely could craft something more specific and more meaningful than a vague promise of "regulatory relief," whatever that is intended to mean. Again, this falls short of what actually needs doing, which begins with the full repeal of the regulation in question, something that is within the power of the executive. Those who wish to purchase contraceptive coverage in their health-insurance plans would of course remain free to do so, but they would not be compelled to do so. We are not so naïve as to believe that this measure, which ought to be uncontroversial, would in fact be uncontroversial. But President Trump advertises himself as a man who has the mettle to make hard and difficult choices. Here's a chance.

Because the Obama administration acted so often through executive order, there is much opportunity for the Trump administration to do the same in reversing its predecessor. But that is only a small part of what needs doing. The president owes it to his voters, his party, and his country to forge and fight for a coherent legislative agenda — which is to say, to do the hard work of being president. Signing a series of shoddy, shallow, and largely symbolic executive orders will not get the job done.

Get to work, Mr. President. You do not have all the time in the world.

So Much for Trump's Populism

David Frum

The merger is complete. As recently as 10 months ago, the Republican Party seemed an uneasy coalition between Paul Ryan conservatives and Donald Trump populists. The conservatives demanded Obamacare repeal, upper-bracket tax cuts, entitlement reform, budget restraint, and a outward-looking American foreign policy. The Trumpists were identified instead with immigration restriction, trade protection, infrastructure investment, an inward-looking foreign policy, and the protection of Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security. These differences once seemed real, enduring, and momentous. Not any more.

Since the election, House Speaker Paul Ryan has made his peace with trade protection in the form of a border adjustment tax, and immigration restriction in the form of a border wall. Today, he collected his reward: a House vote to repeal Obamacare followed by a rally in the White House Rose Garden hosted by President Trump. Onward now to a giant tax cut for upper-income earners! It's a united party again, with Donald Trump setting its style and tone—but Ryan's conservatives reasserting their sway over economic decision-making.

Which is not to say that Ryan conservatives will get all their own way. A more cautious Senate will restrain them, if only for self-protection: Senators worry more about losing elections than do gerrymander-protected representatives. But the notion of a distinctive Trump economic agenda, more attentive to middle-class concerns than that of House Republicans? That notion has dissolved. Except for periodic growling against existing trade deals—and the ban on negotiating new ones like the Trans-Pacific Partnership—the Trump economic agenda has merged with Ryan's.

Trump's Republican Party may attract white working-class votes with its cultural messaging, but the excited promise of 2016 of a "working-class party" can be disregarded. The working class will be stripped of its Medicaid coverage. It will again be exposed to the worst practices of the pre-2010 healthcare status quo. The coming tax cut that will absorb the resources shifted away from healthcare subsidies looks likely to be tilted even more radically to the wealthiest in society than those of Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush.

Meanwhile, the House's next priority after Obamacare repeal and the tax cut will not be the roads and bridges that Trump promised his voters, but amendments to the Dodd-Frank financial regulation bill to allow big banks to engage in riskier transactions.

The Trump administration and the Trump White House will never be "normal." The personality and character of the president precludes that. But its domestic economic policy looks increasingly conventional. Any hope or promise that Donald Trump might augur some departure from the dead-end plutocracy of the post-2010 Republican Party has been quashed. Candidate Trump declared at the Republican convention in Cleveland: "I have joined the political arena so that the powerful can no longer beat up on people that cannot defend themselves. Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it." Now he's cheerleading a bill that restores the ability of insurance companies to price people with pre-existing conditions out of the marketplace.

Paul Ryan and the House Republicans had to swallow a lot of toads to reach this day. They will surely have to swallow more toads in the days ahead. They may never actually achieve their hopes for a giant tax cut financed by healthcare cuts. But if they fail, they will fail because of the self-preservation of the Senate, not because of the principles of the president. Trump may sometimes talk like FDR. But his words do not connect with his actions or with each other. He's original only in his disdain for ethics and democratic norms. When it comes time to decide who gets what—he's as reactionary as any mink-coated Republican who ever hissed Roosevelt at the Trans-Lux.

Protest marches against Trump don't change much. What matters is what happens afterward.

Josh Rivera

Living in the nation's capital has its advantages. I get to see national landmarks so constantly that I am annoyed when people ask me to take them to the Lincoln Memorial. It also desensitizes me to every march, protest or strike of the day. Two weeks ago it was the March for Science, last week it was The Great March for Climate Change (I believe there was a little duplication there, but cool) and this weekend it will be who knows what, oh, right, The Immigrants' March.

But a strike in my hometown of San Juan, Puerto Rico, on Monday did hit this cynical Washingtonian.

As you may know, after Puerto Rico's debt ballooned to a point of no return, the island's finances were handed over to an oversight board created by Congress last year. Much like the case with President Trump in the mainland, recommendations, changes and appointments are starting to have an impact on the island's economy and its people's bottom line.

Seeing Trump appoint a climate change skeptic to head the Environmental Protection Agency gets people mad and moving. Seeing a federal oversight board cut public employee benefits, increase tax revenue, hike water rates, privatize government operations and directly affect your means to put food on the table gets a country violent. Although I repudiate all violence that took place in Puerto Rico's financial district, it's understandable — not to mention convenient for those who wanted to undermine the protest**.**

Therein lies the problem. Marches are a very frail tactic to raise

awareness. A broken window or tear gas thrown and the message suddenly loses all meaning. Take the Women's March in Washington on Jan. 21. As far as demonstrations go, there's no beating more than 2 million attendees. But what did it accomplish other than show discontent? Do marches produce tangible results anymore? Some might still believe that. The March for Science on April 22 is being credited for a $2 billion boost for medical research at the National Institutes of Health.

But let's be honest, the science demonstration served to raise awareness, not garner funding. Not to say that it didn't play a part, but it would have been nothing more than a nice gesture had people not testified before Congress, or if campaign ads directed at lawmakers not run.

I went to a very liberal college campus in Rio Piedras, and we were known as the "strikers" … still are. And during my four years there, none of the almost yearly strikes stopped tuition from increasing or funding from being cut.

I remember speaking up at a student assembly at the School of Public Communication when they were voting for yet another strike and saying, "What's the point? We're known for doing strikes. From an outside perspective, this just looks like a bunch of whining college kids."

And that still holds true. Who cares about another march or strike or protest? Another one of those in Puerto Rico or Washington is the equivalent of Cher announcing another last tour — it won't get more than vague and fleeting acknowledgement.

March, by all means, but be sure to keep the conversation going once the march is done. Civic engagement, more specifically grassroots lobbying, is right now the most powerful tactic citizens have at their disposal. As someone who reads letters from readers every day, I can assure you: If I receive more than three letters on the same issue, I'm paying attention.

Elections have consequences, that much is true. But the fact that your candidate didn't win doesn't change that the winner has a say over the issues that impact your community. So maybe try to do some grassroots lobbying instead of just marching because you're mad.

Call your representatives. Email them. Tweet at them. Facebook message them. Do they have Snapchat? (How cool is that, though?) Snap at them. In short: Annoy them. And maybe even run for office yourself.

Only 36% of Millennials on social media use it to encourage others to take a political action. Why do you think the One Million Moms group can do things like get TV shows to pull sponsors they deem inappropriate, or get them canceled altogether? Because those moms are persistent. Their efforts don't end with a march, they start with one. From there you create contacts, you build coalitions, and you activate people.

I'm not suggesting you do all that for ridiculous protests like One Million Moms threatening a boycott because the Disney channel aired a gay kiss. How about trying to prevent the reauthorization of the Export-Import Bank, or pushing for an audit of Puerto Rico's debt? There's so much that's important — and can't get done with just a march.