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CAPITAL JOURNAL

Donald Trump Shuffles the Ideological Deck

The president-elect's moves so far don't adhere to strict conservative or outsider themes



President-elect Donald Trump, shown in Head of the Harbor, N.Y., over the weekend, hasn't shown a clear ideological bent so far. PHOTO: EVAN VUCCI/ASSOCIATED PRESS



By

GERALD F. SEIB

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If President Barack Obama sought to usher America into a postracial era, it is increasingly apparent that President-elect Donald Trump is opening the door to the postideological era.

In fact, it's nearly impossible to identify a clear ideological bent in the incoming president's early moves. It's probably a mistake to try, because the definitions of left and right, liberal and conservative, are being scrambled right before our eyes.

Some Trump moves so far track with his populist outsider campaign image. Others are moves a conventional conservative could make. Some on his team would have been comfortable picks by any standard-issue Republican; some could as easily have been made by a Democratic president-elect.

The emerging picture suggests only two safe predictions about the Trump presidency. The first is that there will be a continuing struggle between the populist Donald Trump, who battles the corporate world and its love of free markets above all else, and the more conventionally Republican Donald Trump, who is comfortable with the leaders of that same corporate, free-market-loving world.

The second safe prediction is that there are no safe predictions. At a Harvard University postelection conference last week, Trump campaign pollster Tony Fabrizio said the president-elect can't be viewed through traditional "ideological lenses."

"Donald Trump is postideological," he said. "His movement transcends ideology in a lot of respects."

This also shows why the 2016 presidential election was disruptive in ways that extend well beyond Mr. Trump's victory, momentous as that event was. We have just witnessed that rarest of things, a realigning election, in which the coalitions and prevailing ideological lines within both political parties have been shaken up and are going to be put back together in new patterns.

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Mr. Trump won with the votes of blue-collar whites who once were reliably Democratic, and without the votes of many in the business world who once were reliably Republican. Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by more than 2.5 million, but her attempt to bridge the

Democrats' rising liberal wing of Bernie Sanders and the moderate wing still embodied by her husband, Bill Clinton, left everybody a bit dissatisfied. Both parties have to reconsider their ideological and geographical coalitions.

This discombobulated terrain is seen in the Trump transition. On the personnel front, it's easiest to see the populist side of the president-elect in his choice of the antiestablishment firebrand Stephen Bannon to continue serving as a senior counselor.

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But there have been some other appointments of figures known more for challenging convention than for adhering to it. Rep. Mike Pompeo brings the unlikely background of tea-party favorite into his new role as director of

central intelligence. Sen. Jeff Sessions, tapped to be attorney general, is a member of the insiders' club of the U.S. Senate, but on issues such as immigration, he has been more of an outside agitator. Retired Gen. Michael Flynn, the incoming national security adviser, broke with the intelligence mainstream with his outspoken views of Islam.

Other appointments are completely mainstream, and even bipartisan. Treasury Secretary-designate Steven Mnuchin brings the kind of Wall Street background that presidents of both parties have traditionally favored in that role, and he has a longer history of helping Democrats than of helping Republicans. South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, picked to be ambassador to the United Nations, and Trump chief of staff Reince Priebus could have fit comfortably into the administration of any of the mainstream Republicans Mr. Trump defeated.

Vice President-elect Mike Pence and incoming Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price are traditional ideological conservatives, naturally wary of government power, but incoming Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross has shown he knows how to take advantage of government power to protect industries in which he has invested.

It's equally hard to find a straight ideological line in early policy moves. The early emphasis on overturning the Affordable Care Act is entirely in keeping with putting a priority in overturning what conservatives call government overreach. But the move to save jobs in Indiana by convincing Carrier Corp. to stop plans to move an assembly line to Mexico was a classic use of government power—both through economic incentives and threats of reprisal made explicit in a Twitter shout-out Friday night—to try to dictate decisions in the marketplace.

On the foreign-policy front, some conservative national-security thinkers cheer Mr. Trump's decision to hold a conversation with the president of Taiwan and thereby shake up decades of American policy protocol and risk the ire of China. But those same conservatives are aghast at the prospect of a cozy Trump relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

None of this is conventional, but, for Mr. Trump, that may be the point. If there is a discernible Trump ideology, it may be simply to display strength, whether in staring down a corporate chief executive or the Chinese government. That doesn't make Trump world very predictable—which also seems to be how the president-elect likes it.

Write to Gerald F. Seib at jerry.seib@wsj.com