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5 on 45: The state of the GOP: What's normal and what's not

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

KAMARCK: Elaine Kamarck, senior fellow, Brookings Institution, division of Governance Studies. I'm here to talk about the state of the Republican Party these days which seems to be in turmoil. Although the turmoil is really nothing new. It began back in 2015 when Donald Trump's candidacy ignited the passions of a piece of the Republican Party that had always been there. And this piece of the Republican Party is nativist, protectionist, they do have their prejudices that's for sure, many racial. But they also have legitimate economic gripes and worries that frankly the more well-to-do piece of the Republican Party was not answering.

Let's face it, ever since the halcyon days of Ronald Reagan the Republican Party has been in a state of sort of severe division. On the one hand they've had the Wall Street Republicans, on the other hand they've had Main Street Republicans. The Wall Street Republicans have done very, very well in the global economy. The Main Street Republicans see the global economy as a cause of many of their day to day economic woes. This is not unlike the split that exists within the Democratic Party. It's just that in the Republican Party there have been other elements added to it.

So point number one is the divisions we are seeing playing out these days with Senator Flake denouncing President Trump, with Senator Corker denouncing President Trump, with the difficulty President Trump is having pulling the votes together for various pieces of his agenda, these have been lying low if you will in the Republican Party for quite some time. Parties have gone through this in American history quite regularly. Between 1966 and 1972 the Democratic Party just turned itself inside out over the issue of the Vietnam War and a similar thing is happening in the Republican Party today.

Now I think there are two other elements, however, that make the Republican Party divisions a little bit different than what we've seen. As I say, many of these are the problems that you have with intra-party disagreements, but I think there's something else going on here.

One is the unusual candidacy of President Trump and his own personality. Even when a president wins the nomination of a party and becomes president they usually attempt to make amends, to paper over the differences at least within their own party, and they often have reached out to the other party. Donald Trump seems absolutely to have no ability or interest in making friends. Not even within his own party. Now that is in the long run not a pretty good strategy particularly when you are a factional candidate and the factional precedent. In other words you've come out of a piece of your party but not the whole party.

And so, the thing that seems sort of unusual about this is that Donald Trump is picking fights instead of making friends on sort of trivial things and that makes you wonder about his capacity to govern in the long run. So to recap, number one it is normal for parties to go through intense factional battles. Number two, it is not normal for an elected president to try to exacerbate those divisions within the party.

Number three comes to the final big question that's hanging over our politics today which is the Russians and their ability to manipulate social media in a way that divides us rather than unites us. We know they manipulated social media between the two parties. We have recently learned that they have manipulated social media within the Democratic Party to make the divisions between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton even more extreme. And I think we have to ask ourselves, are they manipulating divisions within the Republican Party as well. In other words, do we have a third element here in our politics that we never did have before?

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