LETTERS

Our Citizens United resolution got buried

To the editor:

Sixty-nine New Hampshire towns, led by Conway in 2013, passed resolutions calling on the state legislature to support a constitutional amendment to overturn the Supreme Court's disastrous Citizens United decision, which triggered the flood of money now engulfing our elections.

More than two-thirds of Granite State residents agreed with the need for an amendment.

Last year, the state Senate unanimously passed SB 136, a bill that explicitly recognized the need for such an amendment and established a committee to study the proposals already pending in Congress and recommend further action by the state legislature and New Hampshire's congressional delegation.

On Jan. 7, the state House of Representatives passed SB 136 by four votes. Supporters of the bill moved for reconsideration, expecting that the motion would fail, sealing the deal and sending the bill to the governor. Then things got strange. The electronic voting system suddenly failed; each representative had to cast an individual voice vote.

Reconsideration passed, and the second vote to pass SB 136 was defeated when a dozen representatives switched their votes.

Finally, a vote to bury the bill for this year passed, and the will of the people was thwarted.

On April 9, 2013, Conway voters approved a resolution instructing our state representatives to call for and support a constitutional amendment to restrain the influence of big money on politics.

SB 136 met the requirements of the Conway resolution. Rep. Tom Buco voted for SB 136; Reps. Frank McCarthy and Karen Umberger voted against it.

There was a time in America when legislators were duty-bound to follow explicit voter instructions or resign.

Joe Bagshaw
Center Conway

LETTERS POLICY

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Ross Douthat

My Sarah Palin romance

As a political journalist, you never forget the first time you stop just covering a politician and start identifying with her. The first time you wed your high-minded vision of what politics should be to a real candidate's perishable breath.

My first time arrived in 2008. It lasted only a short while. Her name was Sarah Palin.

Let me explain. That spring, in between the Republican primary and the fall campaign, my friend Reihan Salam and I had published a book called, "Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream."

As the title suggests, we were calling for the GOP to change, but not to moderate in the way that a lot of centrist pundits favored, returning to a Rockefeller-Republican model of fiscally prudent social liberalism. Rather, we thought the party's opportunity (and the country's) lay in a kind of socially conservative populism, which would link the family-values language of the religious right to an economic agenda more favorable to the working class than what the Republicans usually had offered.

Unfortunately, this message conspicuously lacked a tribune in 2008. Mike Huckabee flirted with populism in the primary but never fleshed out an agenda, and the eventual nominee, John McCain, was an "honor and country" candidate who didn't care much about economic policy.

But in Alaska, there was a young, rising-star governor. She was pro-life, evangelical, a working mom. And her record way up north was reformist in a distinctly nonideological way: She was best known for fighting a corrupt nexus of politicians and the oil-and-gas industry, tackling crony capitalism on behalf of ordinary Alaskans. And then, shockingly, McCain picked her as his running mate.

At which point the chattering classes went temporarily insane. Or maybe I went insane, who can say? But either way it seemed like everything I hated, a mix of sneering social liberalism, fecundophobia, anti-evangelical paranoia and class contempt, was being hurled at a candidate who seemed to fit exactly with the "Grand New Party" mold.

So I defended her. I assailed her critics. And then — well, you know what happened then.

Palin gave interviews — terrible, terrible interviews. She was in over her head. Her own paranoia took center stage. She became her critics' caricature, embracing a mix of willful ignorance and proud ressentiment. What was distinctive about her Alaskan career was subsumed into a much more conventional sort of movement conservatism, which she picked up from the professional ideologues who rallied to her during her trial by fire. And eventually the movement tired of her, the culture tired of her, and her act ceased to be interesting even as reality TV.

But now that she has re-emerged to endorse Donald Trump, uniting her brand with his "Make America Great Again" nationalism, it's worth revisiting the original Palin, the outsider who took on a corrupt Alaskan establishment.

A lot of conservatives, especially in Ted Cruz's orbit, have acted shocked or disappointed that Palin would endorse a figure like Trump, who has no plausible claim to be a principled conservative. But given Palin's Alaskan past, the endorsement makes perfect sense. Her real roots are not in Reaganism or libertarianism or the orthodoxies of the donor class. They're in the same kind of blue-collar, Jacksonian, "who's looking out for you?" populism that has carried Trump to the top of the Republican polls. And it's a populism that the GOP is discovering has a lot more appeal to many of its voters than the litmus tests of the official right.

Which means that in a certain way, Trump and Palin together on a stage is the closest American politics has come to offering the populist grand new party that Salam and I called for two presidential campaigns ago.

Except that it isn't what we called for, because we wanted a populism with substance — one that actually offered policy solutions to stagnant wages and rising health-care costs, one that could help Republicans reach out to upwardly mobile blacks and Hispanics as well as whites, and so on down an optimistic wish list.

Whereas Trump-era populism, while it plays very effectively on economic anxiety, mostly offers braggadocio rather than solutions, and white identity politics rather than any kind of one-nation conservatism.

I would like to tell you that this is all the fault of the Republican leadership — that had they been more receptive to populist ideas in 2008 or 2012, they wouldn't be facing a Trumpian revolt today.

That's roughly the argument David Frum makes in this month's Atlantic, in a sweeping essay on the roots of Trumpism. And he makes a strong case. A large part of the Republican donor class would rather lose with "you didn't build that!" than compromise on upper-bracket tax cuts. It would rather try to win Hispanics with immigration reform a hundred times over than try to win them once on pocketbook issues. It prefers to campaign as though it's always 1980, and has little to say to people who have lost out from globalization and socioeconomic change.

A critique that stops with GOP elites, though, might let the voting public off the hook. Because it's also possible that Trumpism, in all its boastful, lord-of-misrule meretriciousness, is what many struggling Americans actually want.

That is, at a certain point, disillusionment with the system becomes so strong that no wonkish policy proposal is likely to resonate anymore. So you can talk all you want (as Marco Rubio's water-treading campaign has tried to do) about improving vocational education or increasing the child-tax credit, and people will tune you out: They want someone who will arm-wrestle the Chinese, make Mexico pay for the wall, smite our enemies and generally stand in solidarity with their resentments, regardless of the policy results.

Since this is a recipe for American-style Putinism, it's not exactly a good sign for the republic that it seems to be resonating. But those of us who want a better, saner and more decent populism than what Donald Trump is selling need to reckon with the implications of his indubitable appeal.

Maybe — hopefully — there's a bridge from Trumpism to a more responsible alternative, as there was between Huey Long and FDR or from George Wallace to Richard Nixon.

But it's also possible that my fellow eggheads and I are grasping at a dream that's already slipped behind us — lost back in the land of might-have-beens, where the dark fields of Wasilla roll on under the night.

Ross Douthat writes for The New York Times.