

CHAPTER 2

“Whaddaya Got?”

In the 1953 film *The Wild One*, a woman approaches Marlon Brando’s character, Johnny Strabler. He is the leader of a gang called the Black Rebels Motorcycle Club. She asks, “What are you rebelling against, Johnny?” His famous reply: “Whaddaya got?”

When the film debuted, Brando’s line—and the character’s entire persona, with his sideburns and black leather jacket—evoked something dangerous. It seemed like contempt or frustration, but even Johnny couldn’t say exactly what it was.

When the 2016 presidential campaign got under way, most Americans were not wearing black leather or riding motorcycles. But in the minds of many observers, Americans were feeling an inchoate rebelliousness that sounded an awful lot like “Whaddaya got?”

Americans were said to be angry, anxious, fearful. They were said to “be poised for a major reset.”¹ In an October 2015 NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll, 69 percent of Americans agreed with this statement: “I feel angry because our political system seems to be working for the insiders with money and power like those on Wall Street or in Washington, rather than it working to help everyday people get ahead.” And 54 percent agreed with the statement, “The economic and political systems in this country are stacked against people like me.” In a different poll from the same time, almost half of Americans said that “America’s best days are behind us,” and just over half said that the “American culture and way of life” had changed for the worse since the 1950s.²

But this focus on voter anger was misleading in two respects. First, any anger coexisted with positive feelings. Thanks to the slow but steady economic recovery after the Great Recession of 2007–9, Americans felt as favorably about the economy as they had in over ten years. In the same October NBC News poll, 58 percent said they were “cautiously optimistic about where things are headed.” Second, there was about as much displeasure and distrust in 2012 when the incumbent president was reelected—suggesting that Americans’ mood in 2016 did not clearly presage any “reset.” In fact, the economic and political conditions in the country pointed to a toss-up race with no clear favorite.

The election’s outcome would not just hinge on trends in the economy, however. There were two other trends—one long standing and one more recent—that were reshaping the American electorate and the Democratic and Republican coalitions. The long-term trend was strengthening partisanship. Republicans and Democrats have become more divided on how they evaluate political leaders, perceive the economy, feel about political issues, and even evaluate the truth of well-established facts. In 2016, “voter anger” was disproportionately a Republican phenomenon. This helped ensure that Obama’s approval rating remained relatively low despite growing optimism about the economy.

The second trend involved the alignment of partisanship and identities tied to race, ethnicity, and religion. The administration of Barack Obama was not only eight years of a Democratic president—in which partisan polarization continued to grow—but also eight years of a black president. As a result, Americans’ racial identities and racial attitudes became even more potent political forces and helped transform the party coalitions. Non-whites increasingly identified as Democrats. Whites—and particularly whites who did not have a college degree and had less favorable views of racial and ethnic minorities—increasingly identified as Republican. The party coalitions became more divided by race and ethnicity after Obama took office and before the 2016 presidential campaign was seriously under way.

Just as conditions in the country did not clearly favor either party, these shifts in the party coalitions did not either. Although many analysts and politicians believed that the country’s growing ethnic diversity posed challenges for Republicans, others argued that the Republicans could benefit, at least in the short term, from appeals to their growing base of white voters. Ultimately, an electorate divided by party and race set the stage for an election that played directly on these divisions and whose outcome appeared far from certain.

“Morning Again in America,” Again?

Obama took office amid the worst recession since the Great Depression. This “Great Recession” was especially punishing because its pairing with a financial crisis led to an even more sluggish recovery.³ For example, the deep recession that occurred in 1981–82—during Ronald Reagan’s first term—saw unemployment peak at a higher level than it did in the 2007–9 recession. But after the 1981–82 recession was over, the economy grew at a much more rapid pace. Unemployment returned to its prerecession value in just under three years. By contrast, this took almost eight years after the Great Recession began.⁴

Despite this sluggish pace, an economic recovery did occur. The overall economy, as measured by the gross domestic product, grew in nearly every quarter between 2009 and 2016. Meanwhile, unemployment fell and disposable income increased. By the end of 2015, the unemployment rate of 5 percent was below its median value over the sixty years from 1948 to 2008. Disposable income was nearly \$2,000 above its prerecession peak in the second quarter of 2008. Falling unemployment, combined with the low inflation rate, meant that the so-called misery index—which peaked during the high unemployment and high inflation of the late 1970s—was close to a sixty-year low.⁵

One persistent question, however, was whether the economic recovery was helping average Americans. Indeed, for many years preceding the recession, most of the gains in income had gone to the wealthiest Americans.⁶ However, Census Bureau data on family incomes showed increases in every income quintile, especially in the two years before the election (figure 2.1).⁷ To be sure, family incomes in the lowest quintile had not returned to their pre-recession level. The point is just that the economic recovery helped all income groups, not just the wealthy.

What is more, the economic recovery registered in how voters themselves saw the economy. This was quite contrary to a lot of commentary in 2015 and early 2016, which described the middle or working class as “losing ground,” “falling behind financially,” or just “feeling screwed” and asserted that “economic blues define campaign[s].”⁸ But the longest-standing measure of Americans’ views of the economy suggested otherwise.

The Index of Consumer Sentiment, which dates to the late 1950s, captures people’s views of their current financial circumstances and economic conditions in the country, as well as their expectations about the near future (figure 2.2).⁹ After Obama took office, consumer sentiment increased initially before dropping sharply in the summer of 2011, when the possibility that Congress might not raise the debt ceiling and thereby cause the United

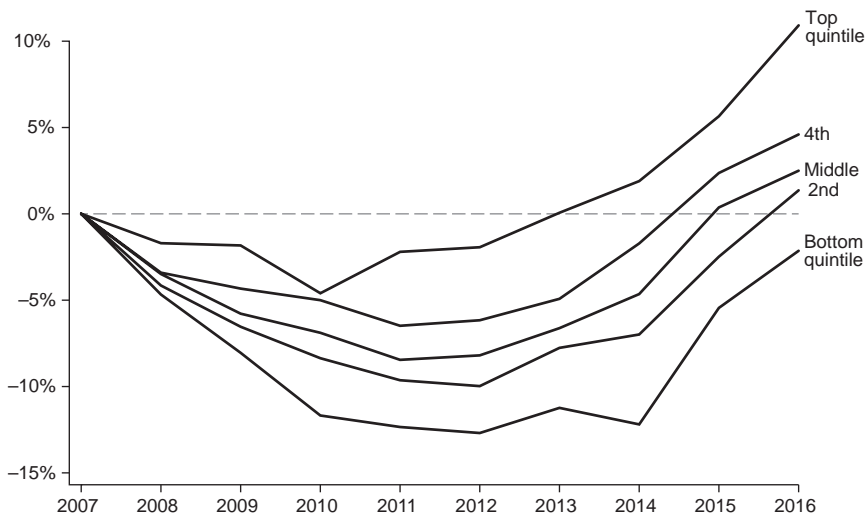


Figure 2.1.

Changes in real average family incomes compared to 2007 levels, by income quintile. Dollar amounts measured in \$2016.

Source: Census Bureau Historical Table F3, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-income-families.html>.

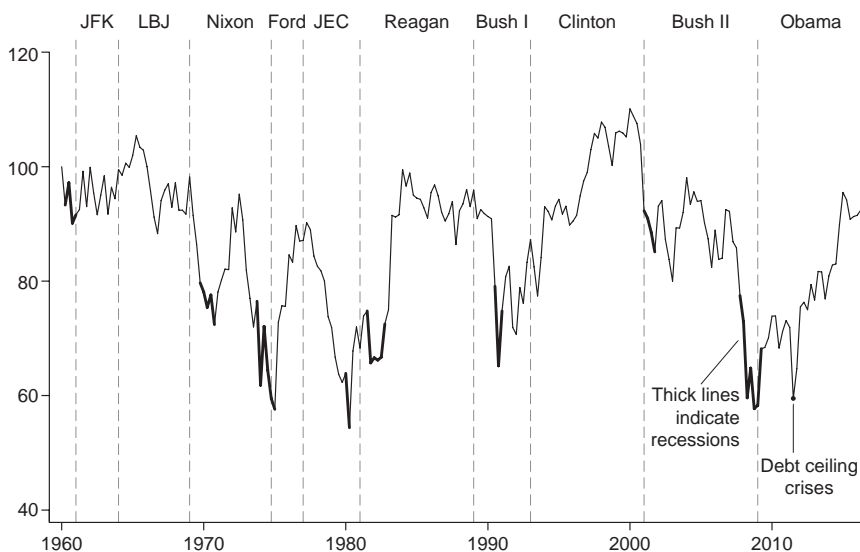


Figure 2.2.

The Index of Consumer Sentiment, 1960–2016.

The data stop in the third quarter of 2016.

Source: University of Michigan, Survey Research Center.

States to default on its debts worried financial markets and Americans alike.

But after that crisis passed, consumer sentiment resumed its upward trajectory. By 2016, consumer sentiment was nearly as positive as it had been during the recovery from the recession of 1981–82.¹⁰ To put this in terms of the survey questions that gauge consumer sentiment, more Americans were saying that both their family's financial situation and business conditions in the country would be good over the next year. More Americans were saying that it was a good time to purchase expensive items like furniture or a refrigerator. Americans actually felt as good about the economy as they did in 1984, when Ronald Reagan ran for reelection in 1984 with a slogan saying that it was “morning again in America.”

This growing optimism was not limited to the wealthy or well educated (figure 2.3). Although people with higher incomes have nearly always had more positive views of the economy than have those with lower incomes, all income groups became more positive after the end of the Great Recession. While middle- and lower-income households may have experienced the economic recovery differently than those with higher incomes, it was not evident in their own evaluations of the economy. The same parallel trends are evident when people are broken down by their level of formal education (see the appendix to this chapter). Consumer sentiment improved among those with and without a college degree.

Indeed, what is distinctive about the Obama years—especially compared to the Reagan years—is how *small* the gap was between income groups. From 2009 until the third quarter of 2016, the average gap was lower than during the administrations of George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Ronald Reagan.¹¹ Americans with different incomes were more similar in their evaluations of the economy under Obama.

It may seem myopic to focus on short-term economic trends, given the longer-term trends toward economic inequality. But the impact of economic inequality on U.S. election outcomes has been ambiguous. Americans support equality in the abstract and say that they are concerned about the growth in economic inequality, but growing inequality has not clearly shifted Americans' policy preferences in the progressive direction that many observers anticipated. This may explain why inequality's steady increase since the 1970s has not made either party politically dominant.¹²

Less ambiguous, however, is the impact of short-term economic trends, which are strongly related to presidential election outcomes and do help explain oscillating party control. The only debate involves how short the short term is: the six months or the two years before the election. The political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels characterize economic voting

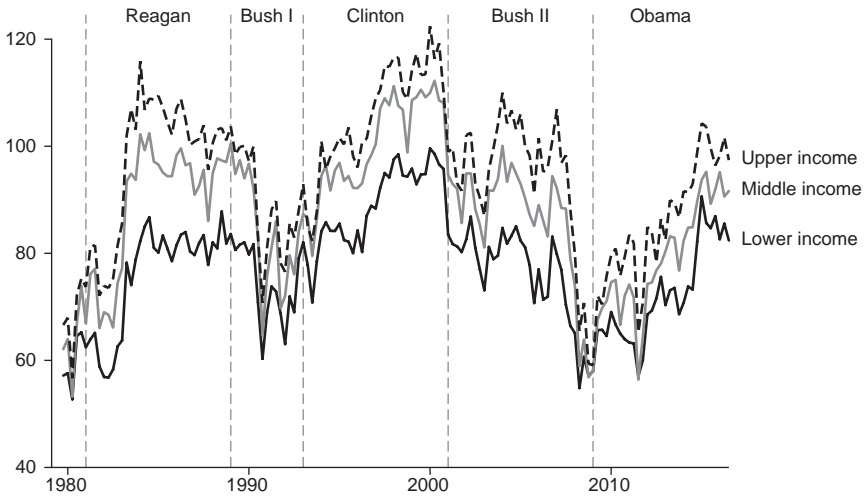


Figure 2.3.

The Index of Consumer Sentiment among income groups, 1980–2016.

The data stop in the third quarter of 2016.

Source: University of Michigan, Survey Research Center.

with this pungent metaphor: “Like medical patients recalling colonoscopies, who forget all but the last few minutes, the voters’ assessments of past pain and pleasure are significantly biased by ‘duration neglect.’”¹³ As a result, economic trends in 2015 and 2016 were the most consequential for understanding who would win the White House.

The Wrong Track

Despite the economic recovery and rising consumer sentiment, however, the zeitgeist of 2016 was hardly “morning again in America.” There were significant currents of dissatisfaction with the country, the federal government, and Barack Obama. But this dissatisfaction was generally *not* worse in 2016 than in the previous several years, despite the ongoing narrative about “angry” voters. Instead, 2016 stood out not because voters were angrier but because their improving views of the economy had not much affected their views of Obama and the country.

Early in the election year, commentators often focused on the fact that most Americans told pollsters that the country was on the “wrong track.” But this is the norm: in thousands of polls since 1981, the percentage saying “wrong track” has outnumbered the percentage saying “right direction” 88 percent

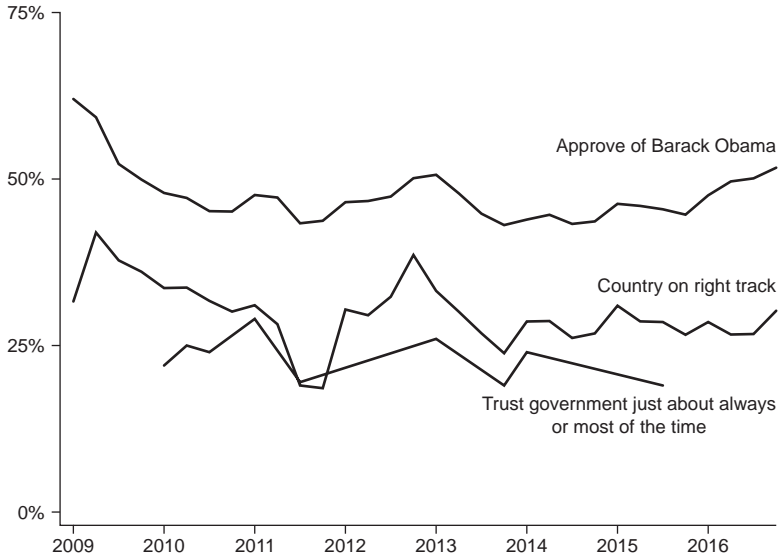


Figure 2.4.

Presidential approval, trust in government, and evaluations of the country's direction, 2009–16.

All data aggregated to the quarterly level except political trust. The data include only polls taken before November 8, 2016.

Sources: Pew Research Center surveys (trust), Pollster.com (presidential approval, right direction).

of the time. Indeed, saying “wrong track” is virtually a ritual without clear political consequences—and that was especially true in 2016, when polls showed that the people who said “wrong track” did not even agree on whom to blame. This is why the “wrong track” question is not a good predictor of who will win presidential elections.¹⁴

Moreover, there had been no increase in dissatisfaction or anger (figure 2.4). Indeed, if anything, approval of Obama was *improving* somewhat in late 2015 and 2016. Other polls showed a similar trend. For example, a fall 2015 Pew Research Center poll asked respondents whether they were “basically content,” “frustrated,” or “angry” with the federal government. The most common response was “frustrated” (57%). Only 22 percent said “angry,” and this was lower than in the fall of 2013, when anger was more prevalent during the federal government’s partial shutdown.¹⁵ In short, Americans were no more “angry” than in 2012, when a comfortable majority reelected the incumbent president.

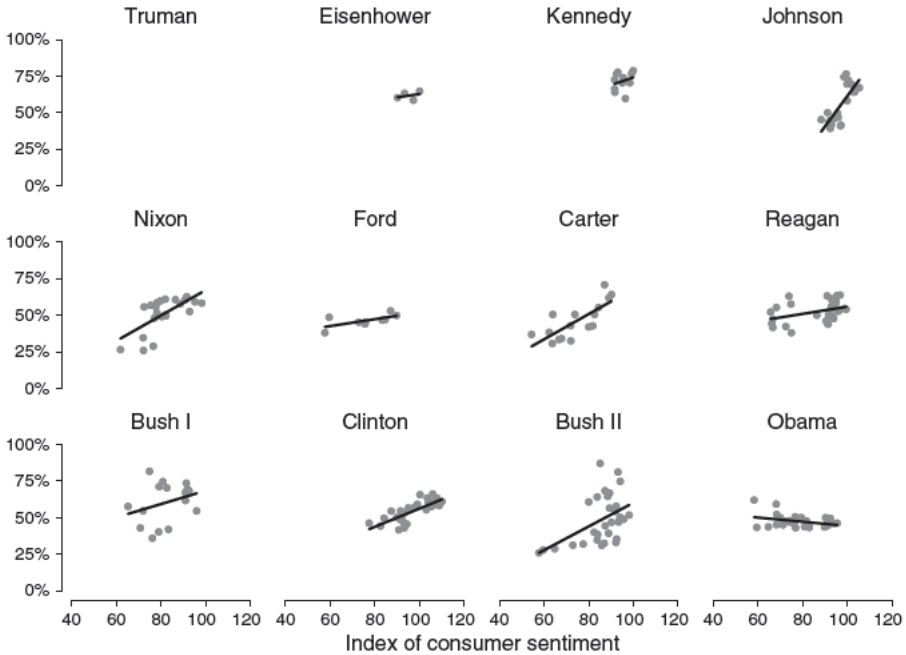


Figure 2.5.

The relationship between consumer sentiment and presidential approval.

For Obama, the data end in the third quarter of 2016.

Source: University of Michigan, Survey Research Center.

More distinctive was the divergence between perceptions of the economy and political evaluations. Typically, the economy looms large in many different political attitudes. When people perceive that the economy is doing well, they evaluate elected officials more favorably, trust the government more, and are more likely to think that the country is going in the right direction.¹⁶ But by 2016, people’s increasingly favorable economic evaluations had not translated into more favorable political attitudes. For example, even though economic evaluations were as positive as in the mid-2000s, *fewer* people said that the country was going in the right direction: 26 percent in the last quarter of 2015 as opposed to 40 percent in the third and fourth quarters of 2004.

Obama’s approval rating was also lower than expected given the public’s positive evaluations of the economy. Indeed, Obama was the only president since John F. Kennedy whose approval ratings did not increase alongside consumer sentiment (figure 2.5). In fact, in Obama’s case, the relationship between consumer sentiment and his approval rating was actually *negative*.¹⁷ If

presidential approval were a function of consumer sentiment and nothing else, Obama should have been more popular than he was—approximately 5 percentage points more popular in the third quarter of 2016. But his approval ratings proved stickier than consumer sentiment alone predicted.¹⁸

This put Obama and the Democratic Party in a different position from four years before. As 2011 came to an end, views of Obama were more positive than objective economic conditions and other factors would have predicted. Voters tended to blame George W. Bush more than Obama for the state of the economy, perhaps because the Great Recession began when Bush was in office.¹⁹ But even if Obama escaped some of the blame for that recession, in his second term he seemed to have escaped credit for the recovery.

A Toss-Up Election

What did these trends—or lack thereof—portend for the presidential election? As far back as 2014, many political observers and even some Republicans were bullish on the Democrats' chances. There were headlines like "The Republican Party's Uphill Path to 270 Electoral Votes in the 2016 Elections" and "The Most Likely Next President Is Hillary Clinton." In a January 2016 survey of academic experts, sixteen out of the seventeen expected the Democrats to win the White House.²⁰

Early optimism for the Democrats was justified in this sense: the economic recovery and the public's assessment of Obama advantaged the Democratic Party. Incumbent parties tend to do better when the economy is improving, especially during the election year. Politicians themselves know this. Richard Nixon, for example, blamed a late economic downturn for his loss in the 1960 presidential election. In his book *Six Crises*, he wrote, "In October, usually a month of rising unemployment, the jobless rolls increased by 452,000. All the speeches, television broadcasts, and precinct work in the world could not counteract that one hard fact."²¹ And even though Obama's approval had not increased as much as expected given growing optimism about the economy, neither was it clearly a drag on the Democrats' chances.

A simple statistical model of presidential elections from 1948 to 2012 demonstrates that these two factors favored the Democrats in 2016. The model includes changes in the gross domestic product from the first quarter to the third quarter of the election year and the president's approval rating as of June of the election year (see this chapter's appendix for more details). In 2016, the economy's nonannualized growth rate was 1.1 percentage points in the first two quarters of the year, and Obama's approval rating in June 2016 was 50 percent. Economic growth was solid but not spectacular compared to

other elections when the incumbent party was seeking a third consecutive term. For example, in 1960, the growth rate was slightly negative, just as Nixon noted. But in 1988 and 2000, growth was about a point higher than in 2016. Obama’s June approval rating was the same as Reagan’s in 1988, though lower than Clinton’s in 2000 (58%) and Eisenhower’s in 1960 (61%).

It makes sense, then, that these two factors forecasted a Democratic victory but still gave Republicans a significant chance. The Democratic candidate was estimated to receive 51.8 percent of the major-party vote. Factoring in the uncertainty underlying the forecast, this translated into a 72 percent chance of a Democratic victory—a real, but hardly definitive, advantage.²²

Other factors, however, made the election’s outcome less certain. For one, there was no incumbent on the ticket. This matters in two ways. First, there is an incumbency advantage in presidential elections. One study of American presidential elections from 1828 to 2004 found that incumbents receive an average of 2.5 points of additional vote share in presidential elections. As the political scientist James Campbell noted, incumbency is no guarantee of victory, but it is “an opportunity that can usually be converted to an advantage.” It is an advantage that the Democrats did not have in 2016.²³

Second, the impact of the economy and presidential approval on presidential elections appears to be larger when the incumbent is on the ticket. Voters tend to assign more credit or blame to the actual incumbent than to any potential successor.²⁴ A different model, which allowed the impact of presidential approval and the GDP growth to vary based on whether an incumbent was running, produced a less favorable forecast for the Democrat: just under 50 percent of the major-party vote (see again this chapter’s appendix).

The forecast was also more favorable for Republicans after accounting for the fact that the Democrats were running for a third consecutive presidential term. Across established democracies, the longer a party has been in power, the less likely citizens are to vote for its candidates. The political scientist Alan Abramowitz has shown that parties are penalized more after holding the White House for two or more terms than when they have held it for only one term. The political scientist Christopher Wlezien has called this “the cost of ruling” and shown that it may stem partly from the tendency of presidents to push policy in one ideological direction even as the public shifts in the opposite direction.²⁵

Even before 2016, the Democrats had suffered from the cost of ruling, losing a large number of seats in Congress and state legislatures. In 2016, the potential cost of ruling was substantial: even after accounting for presidential approval and economic growth in the 1948–2012 presidential elections, an incumbent party that had already served at least two terms received an

average of 3.8 points fewer of the vote, compared to a party that had served only one term. A model with these three factors predicted that each party had almost exactly a 50 percent chance of winning (see this chapter's appendix).

These simple forecasting models are not perfect predictors. They do not tell us everything about presidential elections. They do not imply that the campaign itself is irrelevant. They assume that the candidates are evenly matched in their capabilities and resources. They produce forecasts with substantial uncertainty.²⁶

Nevertheless, these models provide a useful baseline. In 2016, aspects of the electoral landscape were favorable to the Democrats, particularly a growing economy and a Democratic president whose popularity was growing as the election year proceeded. Still, the disjuncture between Obama's approval and public sentiments about the economy—combined with Obama's absence from the ticket—made it less than certain that Democrats would get credit for a growing economy. Conditions also seemed ripe for the Democrats to suffer the “cost of ruling” and Republicans to benefit accordingly.

The sum of these factors suggested that the election was a toss-up. This conclusion was consistent with a broader range of forecasting models—some of which predicted a Republican victory and others of which predicted a Democratic victory. A statistical averaging of these models showed that the election was, again, essentially a toss-up. Bettors in election forecasting markets had a similar view: as of January 2016, they gave Democrats only a 60 percent chance of winning, a narrow advantage at best.²⁷

In short, the election-year conditions in the country did not support the early confidence in the Democrats' chances. The presidential race was either party's race to lose.

Bitter Partisans

The impact of election-year conditions shows how presidential elections depend on short-term forces in the country. But long-term forces are also at work, ones that do not shift as quickly from election to election. Of these forces, none is more important than Americans' abiding loyalty to a political party. In 2016, party loyalty meant that voter “anger” was most prevalent in the Republican Party. Republicans manifested the most dissatisfaction, distrust, and disapproval. Although these Republican sentiments were not any worse than in the previous few years, they were crucial to understanding why Obama's approval ratings lagged the growing economy and how and for whom dissatisfaction would matter in 2016.

Partisan divisions in political attitudes are nothing new. More than fifty years ago, the authors of the seminal political science book *The American Voter* wrote, “Few factors are of greater importance for our national elections than the lasting attachments of tens of millions of Americans to one of the parties.” These divisions have sharpened even since then. Polarization among political leaders has made partisanship among ordinary Americans a more potent force. Americans have become better “sorted” in terms of party and ideology: Democrats increasingly describe themselves as liberals and Republicans increasingly describe themselves as conservatives. Americans have become more hostile toward the opposite party and toward its presidential candidates. Americans are now more concerned that their son or daughter might marry someone in the opposite party. Americans appear willing to discriminate against members of the opposite party and even find them less physically attractive. This does not mean that the parties have become monoliths or that people have become orthodox liberals or conservatives. But it does mean that partisan antagonisms are growing. Unsurprisingly, then, more Americans today see differences between the parties. In fact, a politically inattentive American today is as likely to perceive important differences between the parties as a politically attentive American was in 1960.²⁸

Partisanship is also a lens through which Americans perceive the objective world. As the authors of *The American Voter* wrote, “Identification with a party raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation.”²⁹ For example, Americans tend to think the economy is doing better when their party controls the White House. This partisan bias in economic perceptions increased between 1985 and 2007, particularly during the Bush administration, and then declined during the Great Recession, when the downturn was so severe that most Americans—including both Democrats and Republicans—evaluated the economy unfavorably.³⁰

But by 2016, this partisan bias had reasserted itself. YouGov/*Economist* polls conducted from June to December 2015 found that, among Democrats, 27 percent said they were better off financially than a year ago, 48 percent said that their finances were about the same, and 20 percent said they were worse off financially. By contrast, only 11 percent of Republicans said they were better off financially, while 43 percent said they were worse off.³¹

Republicans were even more pessimistic about the economy when its performance was directly linked to President Obama. In a May 2016 survey, some respondents were asked to evaluate the economy and their personal financial situation relative to “the year 2008,” and others were asked to evaluate these things relative to “when President Obama was first elected.” Republicans were about 20 points more likely to say that both the national economy

and their own finances had “gotten worse” when the question mentioned Obama.³²

This partisan divide was important enough to override the impact of income. Class cleavages in financial satisfaction paled in comparison to the partisan cleavage. According to YouGov/*Economist* polls, Republicans in the highest income quintile, those making more than \$100,000 per year, were actually slightly *less satisfied* than Democrats in the lowest income quintile, those making less than \$20,000 per year. Economic dissatisfaction was in large part a partisan phenomenon.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Republicans and Democrats had very different views of Barack Obama. Partisan differences in assessments of Obama were larger than they had been for any previous president. On average, Obama’s approval rating among Democrats was almost 70 points higher than his approval rating among Republicans. This difference was even larger than the partisan differences during the administrations of George W. Bush (60 points) and Bill Clinton (55 points), both of whom held office when partisan polarization was increasing.³³

Partisan polarization also helps explain why increasingly positive evaluations of the economy did not appear to improve Obama’s approval rating. It is not only that partisans saw the economy differently but also that in a polarized age, Americans may give little credit to a president not of their own party. A good comparison is again to the last quarter of 1983, when consumer sentiment was essentially the same as at the end of 2015. At that point in time, 87 percent of Republicans approved of Reagan and so did 30 percent of Democrats. By June 2016, Obama’s support in his own party was almost as high as Reagan’s, but it was much lower among Republicans (14%)—about where it had been for almost six years.

The growing salience of partisanship is also manifest in voting behavior. Fewer voters split their tickets. There are fewer true swing voters who might vote for one party’s candidate in one election and the other party’s candidate in the next election. It is typical for a presidential candidate to attract the support of 90 percent or more of his or her party’s supporters.³⁴

Presidents are obliged, of course, to state their righteous opposition to partisanship. George W. Bush pledged to be a “uniter, not a divider,” and Obama inveighed against the “bitter partisanship and petty bickering that’s shut you out, let you down and told you to settle.” But the behavior of Americans—and perhaps presidents themselves—undercuts these promises, and partisanship in the American political system has ratcheted ever upward.³⁵

Race, Ethnicity, and the Changing Party Coalitions

In an interview late in his presidency, Obama lamented “the suspicion between the races” and said that it “has shaped an entire generation of voters and tapped into their deepest anxieties.”³⁶ Indeed, the racial divides that were already salient to American politics became even larger during Obama’s presidency, and this provided one of the most important ways in which his presidency shaped the 2016 election.

Political divides in American politics have increasingly become racial and ethnic divides—ones that touch on feelings about groups such as African Americans, immigrants, and Muslims. The Democratic Party has become increasingly attractive to nonwhites and to whites with more formal education, who tend to have more favorable attitudes toward racial and ethnic minorities. The Republican Party has become increasingly attractive to whites and especially whites with less formal education, who tend to have less favorable views of minorities.

The “racialization” of partisanship was under way even before Obama became a national figure. Americans’ partisan attachments became more closely aligned with racial attitudes in the post–civil rights era as politicians from the two parties increasingly diverged in both their policies and their rhetoric about race.³⁷ But eight years of an African American president accelerated and intensified racialization. This meant that the outcome of the 2016 election would depend not only on election-year fundamentals like the economy but also on how successfully the candidates could navigate these racial dynamics and mobilize a winning coalition.

The first major change in the party coalitions was the increasing Democratic advantage among nonwhites (figure 2.6). This was not preordained: for years, many nonwhites—especially Latinos and Asians—had not consistently aligned with one political party. But that changed. Although there was no secular trend in Asian American partisanship from 2007 to 2016, the longer-term trend was clear: in exit polls, Asian Americans’ support for Democratic presidential candidates increased from 31 percent in 1992 to 73 percent in 2012. Latinos also came to identify more with the Democratic Party. Among Latinos, Democrats outnumbered Republicans by 23 points in 2002 but 36 points in 2016.³⁸

African Americans’ identification with the Democratic Party strengthened as well, even though blacks had long been Democratic. Figure 2.6 understates this shift because it does not capture how strongly blacks identified with the Democratic Party. But in the American National Election Studies, the percentage of blacks who said that they were “strong” Democrats increased from 31 percent in 2004 to 55 percent in 2012.

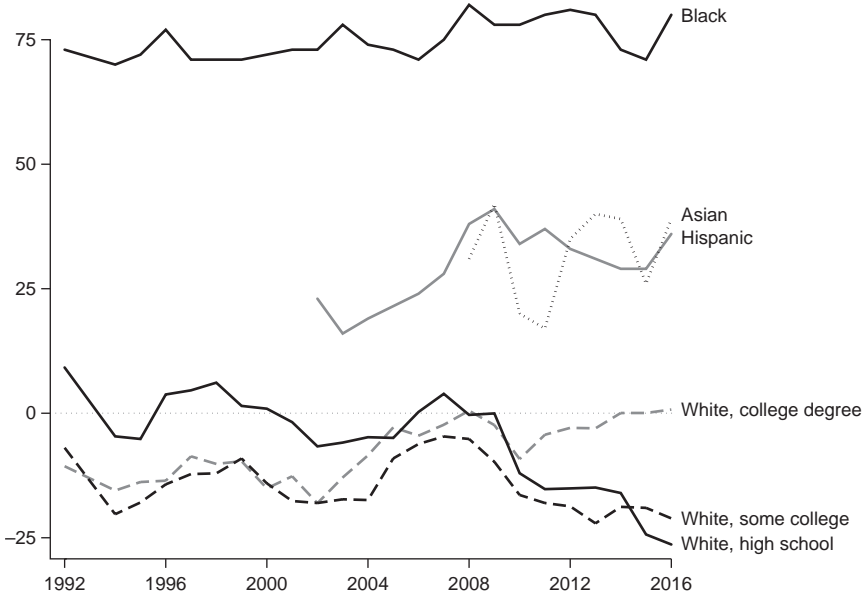


Figure 2.6.

Democratic advantage in partisanship, by race and education.

The figure presents the percent of respondents who identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party, minus the percent who identify with or lean toward the Republican Party. Positive numbers indicate a Democratic advantage.

Source: Pew Research Center surveys through August 2016.

For whites, the trend was exactly opposite: during the Obama era, whites were leaving the Democratic Party. In Pew Research Center surveys from 2007, whites were just as likely to call themselves Democrats as they were to call themselves Republicans. But by 2010, whites were 12 points more likely to be Republicans than Democrats (51% versus 39%).

White flight from the Democratic Party occurred almost entirely among whites without a college degree. Although these voters were widely believed to have fled the Democratic Party years earlier, that was confined to the South. What transpired under Obama was broader. Whites who did not attend college were evenly split between the two parties in Pew surveys conducted from 1992 to 2008. But by 2015, white voters who had a high school degree or less were 24 percentage points more Republican than Democratic (57% versus 33%). White voters with some college education but no four-year degree were 19 points more Republican (55% versus 36%). Meanwhile, whites with a college degree shifted toward the Democratic Party. Thus, the increasing alignment between education and whites' party identification—also known as the

“diploma divide”—was largely a phenomenon of the Obama era and preceded the 2016 campaign itself.³⁹

Why did this diploma divide in party identification emerge—and why did it emerge when it did? A key reason was race. For many years, whites with less formal education had not mapped their views about race onto their broader political views. Because they tended to follow politics less closely, they had not fully learned or internalized the long-standing divisions between the Democratic and Republican Parties on civil rights and other issues related to race. But once Obama was in office, whites with less formal education became better able to connect racial issues to partisan politics. There was a large increase in the proportion of non-college-educated whites who knew that the Democratic Party was more supportive of liberal racial policies than was the Republican Party.⁴⁰

Then racial attitudes became more connected to whether whites identified as Democratic or Republican. Whether whites attributed racial inequality more to the country’s legacy of racial discrimination or more to blacks’ lack of effort increasingly came to distinguish Democrats from Republicans (top left panel of figure 2.7). These beliefs about racial inequality—measured by asking respondents how much they agreed with statements like “It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites” and “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class”—capture a central debate about race in America and especially how much white Americans subscribe to the common stereotype that blacks themselves do not try hard enough.⁴¹

Some of this racialization occurred before Obama took office, particularly between 1990 and 1994, when the partisan balance among whites who attributed racial inequality to blacks’ lack of effort shifted from near parity to a 22-point advantage for the Republicans. But the polarization among whites increased sharply when Obama first ran for president. In 2012, there was a 15-point Democratic advantage among those emphasizing racial discrimination and a 42-point Republican advantage among those emphasizing blacks’ lack of effort.

The same pattern was visible when comparing whites by their support for interracial dating (upper right-hand panel of figure 2.7). This time, however, the trend is entirely confined to the Obama era, when even racial issues that had never divided white Democrats from white Republicans suddenly did so. About 17 percent of people opposed interracial dating in 2009, and 13 percent did so in 2012. These people shifted sharply to the Republican Party while Obama was in office.

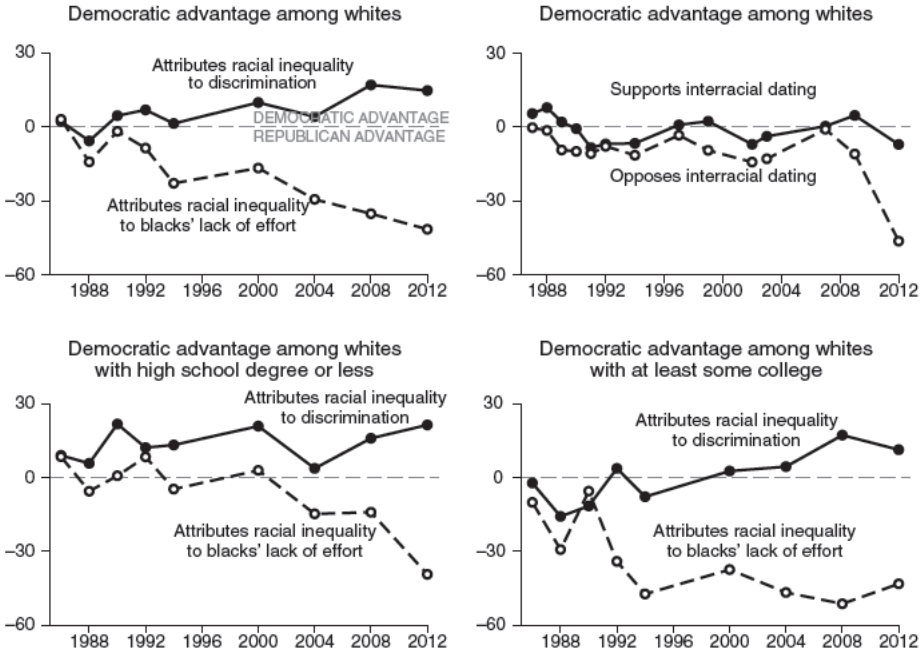


Figure 2.7.

Racial attitudes, education, and whites' party identification.

The figure presents the percent of whites who identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party.

Source: American National Election Studies and Pew Research Center (interacial dating graph).

This polarization during Obama's presidency was most pronounced among whites who did not have a college education (bottom left-hand panel of figure 2.7). The Republican advantage in this group increased from 15 points in 2004 to 39 points in 2012. Whites who did not have a college education but emphasized racial discrimination became more Democratic. There was no similar pattern during the Obama era among whites with at least some college education (bottom right-hand panel of figure 2.7). Among these more politically attentive whites, polarization along racial lines occurred earlier.

The growing alignment between racial attitudes and white partisanship was not due to some other factor, such as ideology or religiosity. In fact, no other factor predicted changes in white partisanship during Obama's presidency as powerfully and consistently as racial attitudes. Nor was the racialization of partisanship simply a by-product of whites' changing their racial attitudes to match their views of Obama. Racial attitudes that were measured before Obama became president predicted subsequent changes in party identification when these individuals were reinterviewed during his presidency.⁴²

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Plaintiffs Exhibit No. 179

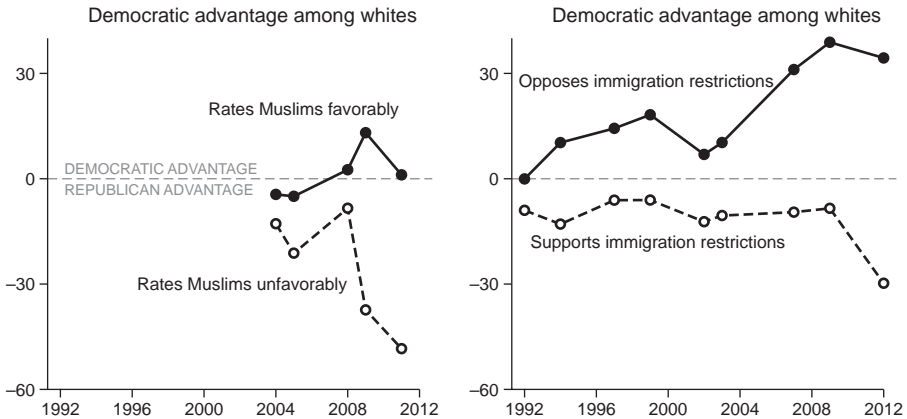


Figure 2.8.

Muslims, immigration, and whites' identification with the Democratic Party.

Sources: Pew Global Attitudes Project (favorability toward Muslims) and Pew Values Surveys (immigration).

The partisanship of whites became aligned not only with views of racial inequality but also with views of Muslims and immigration. Because Obama was repeatedly characterized as Muslim or foreign born, a general aversion to all minority groups, and to Muslims in particular, became more strongly correlated with white Americans' vote preferences in both the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections.⁴³ Consequently, whites who rated Muslims unfavorably became more likely to identify as Republican once Obama took office (figure 2.8). Similarly, whites who wanted stricter immigration restrictions (around 75%) moved toward the Republicans while whites who opposed these restrictions increasingly identified as Democrats. Partisan polarization on immigration predated Obama's presidency but strengthened during it. Regardless of whether people were switching parties based on their attitudes toward Muslims and immigrants or changing their attitudes about these groups to reflect the growing partisan divisions on Islam and immigration, the implications for the 2016 election were the same: the two parties were more divided on issues of race, ethnicity, and religion than they were before Obama's presidency.⁴⁴

Of course, these Obama-era trends also coincided with the onset of the Great Recession. But it is unlikely that economics was driving defections from the Democratic Party among whites with less formal education or less favorable views of racial and ethnic minorities. For one, the recession began under a Republican president, George W. Bush, and both he and his party received most of the blame—which is exactly why Obama won so handily in 2008. Moreover, rising unemployment has historically favored the Democratic Party in presidential and gubernatorial elections, perhaps because Democrats are

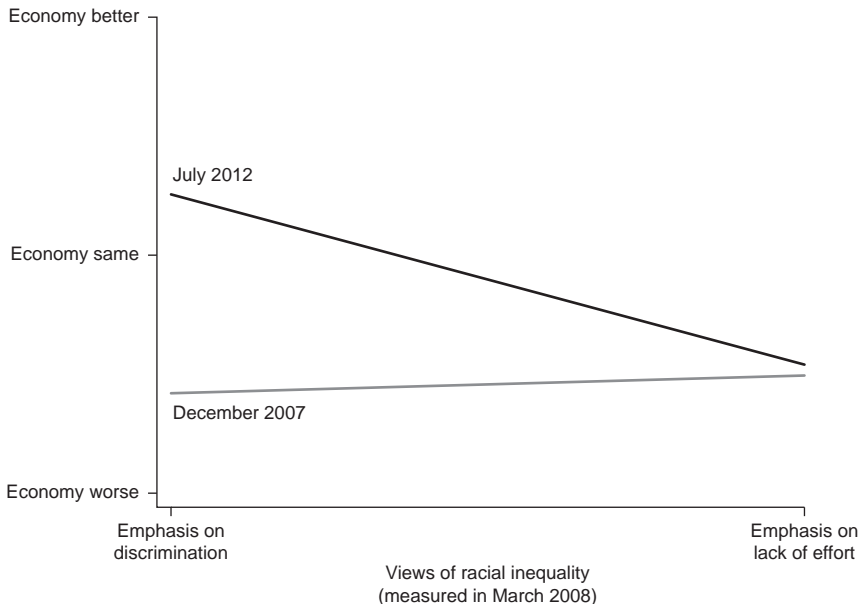


Figure 2.9. Racial attitudes and whites’ evaluations of the national economy, 2007 versus 2012. The analysis includes 1,904 white respondents who were interviewed in both December 2007 and July 2012. The results are based on a model that accounts for party and ideology. Predicted values calculated by setting partisanship and ideology to their averages among white respondents. Source: Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project.

perceived as caring more about the issue of jobs and employment than do Republicans.⁴⁵ If anything, then, the Great Recession should have driven the voters experiencing economic hardship to Obama and the Democratic Party. And even if voters did blame Obama, one would then expect defections from the Democratic Party to reverse themselves as the economic recovery took hold, but instead the defections accelerated over the course of Obama’s presidency. This is why racial attitudes appear the more likely culprit.

Racialization affected more than partisanship, too. Opinions about many issues linked to Obama became influenced by both racial attitudes and race—a phenomenon called “the spillover of racialization.” Particularly relevant was how racialization spilled over into evaluations of the economy. In December 2007, beliefs about racial inequality were not related to whites’ perceptions of whether the economy was getting better or worse, after accounting for partisanship and ideology (figure 2.9). But when these exact same people

were reinterviewed in July 2012—nearly four years into the Obama administration—these racial attitudes were strongly correlated with economic perceptions. Along with partisanship, racial attitudes appeared to fuel economic anxiety during Obama’s presidency.⁴⁶ This presaged the “racialized economics” of the 2016 campaign.

Conclusion

In early 2016, two *Washington Post* writers, David Maraniss and Robert Samuels, set out to gauge the mood of Americans by traveling the country for over a month. What they found was much more than an all-consuming anger:

For every disgruntled person out there who felt undone by the system and threatened by the way the country was changing, caught in the bind of stagnant wages or longing for an America of the past, we found someone who had endured decades of discrimination and hardship and yet still felt optimistic about the future and had no desire to go back. In this season of discontent, there were still as many expressions of hope as of fear. On a larger level, there were as many communities enjoying a sense of revival as there were fighting against deterioration and despair.⁴⁷

This is precisely what the quantitative evidence shows. The economy had improved since the Great Recession and voters realized it, but their assessments of Obama and the country were less favorable than the economy alone might have predicted. At the same time, however, there was little evidence of any increase in “voter anger” leading into the election year—and no clear signs of a “change election” predicated on growing anger.

Simple narratives about voter anger also obscured who was angry and why. Anger clearly depended on partisan and racial identities. This was visible in the polarization of Democrats and Republicans in their approval of Obama, their perceptions of the economy, and, increasingly, their views of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. And because racial attitudes evoke angry emotions in ways that other political attitudes do not, racialization may help explain why some whites appeared angry despite positive trends like a growing economy.⁴⁸

If racial and ethnic identities were reshaping American politics and the party coalitions, the obvious question was which party would benefit. To many observers, these trends gave Democrats the advantage. The white fraction of eligible voters was shrinking—from 84 percent in 1980 to an estimated 70 percent by 2016. Some Republicans believed the party needed to move

quickly to court nonwhite voters. As Republican senator Lindsey Graham put it in June 2015, “My party is in a hole with Hispanics.” Other analysts saw little chance that Republicans could counter a growing Democratic Party advantage in the Electoral College. In that 2014 article about the GOP’s “uphill path to 270 electoral votes,” the *Washington Post*’s Dan Balz wrote, “A recent conversation with a veteran of GOP presidential campaigns raised this question: Which, if any, of the recent battleground states are likely to become more Republican by 2016? The consensus: very few.”⁴⁹

But a more racialized politics can cut in many directions, especially in the short term. For this reason, at least some strategists and political scientists argued that Republican candidates could gain from catering to their base of white voters.⁵⁰ Some evidence supported that argument. Drawing attention to the country’s changing demographics in a survey significantly increased the percentage of whites who identified as Republicans. Similarly, drawing attention to the Democratic Party’s outreach to Latino voters made white Democrats view their party less favorably. And increased contact with racial and ethnic minorities in Chicago and Boston led whites to express more ethnocentric attitudes, turn out to vote in higher numbers, and support Republican candidates at greater rates. Identity politics certainly cut both ways in down-ballot races during Obama’s presidency. The Democrats’ majority in the House of Representatives when Obama entered the White House had turned into a paltry minority. Those Democratic defections were most prevalent among voters with less favorable views about racial and ethnic minorities. The question for 2016 was whether increased Democratic support from nonwhites would again be offset by greater Republican support and higher turnout among whites.⁵¹

Regardless of which party would benefit, one thing was clear: racially charged issues were increasingly central to American party politics. That these issues would be central to the 2016 campaign itself became clearer on the morning of June 16, 2015.

CHAPTER 3

Indecision

After eight years of the Obama administration, Republicans had lots of ideas about how to win back the White House. Some wanted the party to woo the constituencies that seemed crucial to Obama's victories, including women and ethnic minorities. Some wanted the party to embrace an orthodox conservatism and stop nominating candidates whom they deemed too moderate. Others wanted candidates who would just stick to a script. As Republican National Committee (RNC) chair Reince Priebus put it right before the 2014 election, "I'd rather have candidates being careful to a fault than, you know, having a fountain of blabber coming out of their mouth that's not disciplined."¹

On the morning of June 16, 2015, a candidate who would do none of those things entered the Republican primary: Donald Trump. At first glance, Trump seemed like the sort of marginal candidate that the GOP could quickly shunt to the side. After all, the party had successfully coordinated on more mainstream front-runners in earlier nomination battles—a phenomenon documented in a widely discussed political science book, *The Party Decides*.² Less than a year later, however, Trump stood alone as the last remaining Republican presidential candidate. He had defeated sixteen others, including candidates with more political experience and support among Republican leaders. He defied the predictions of many politicians, political observers, pundits, and political scientists.

Trump's count of delegates to the national convention shows the relative ease with which he won (figure 3.1). He won early and often, building a

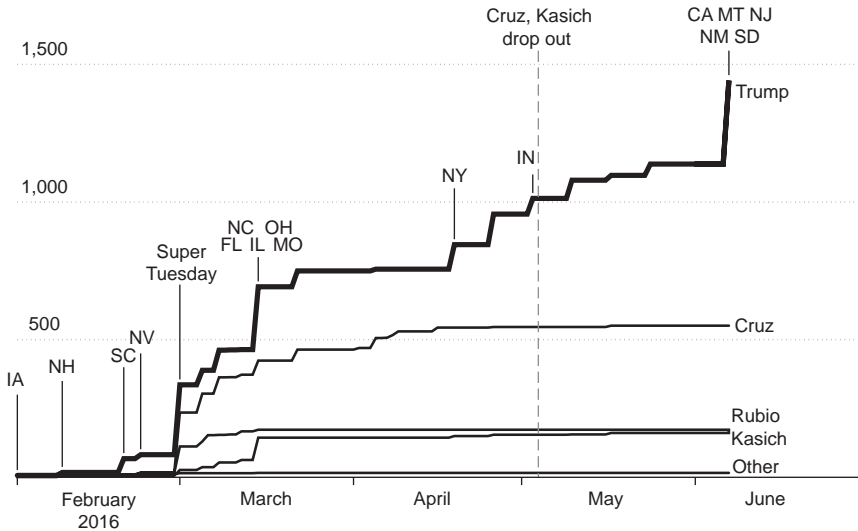


Figure 3.1.

Delegates won by the Republican presidential candidates.

The graph does not include the 130 delegates who were not bound by state primaries or caucuses to vote for a candidate. Data courtesy of Josh Putnam of Frontloading Headquarters.

sizable lead by the middle of March 2016, only six weeks after the first contest in Iowa. None of the other candidates put a dent in that lead. The last to drop out, Senator Ted Cruz of Texas and Governor John Kasich of Ohio, were hundreds of delegates behind, with little chance of catching up.

How Trump beat the odds to secure the nomination is perhaps the most important story of the 2016 election. After all, growing partisan polarization, combined with equivocal conditions in the country, made this an election that Republicans could win. Almost any candidate they put forward would have a reasonable chance of winning the White House.

Trump's appeal was predicated on three factors. The first was the fractured ranks of Republican Party leaders even before the 2016 election. They were divided on policy, particularly on issues like immigration, and divided on tactics, with a more moderate "establishment" faction frequently at war with a conservative "insurgent" faction over basic questions like whether to allow a government shutdown. This factionalism made it difficult for Republican leaders to coordinate on a single front-runner among the party's many presidential aspirants. There were various candidates competing within different factions of the party, instead of one candidate serving to unify these

factions. Therefore, voters got no clear signal from Republican leaders about which candidate to support.³

This void was filled in part by the second factor helping Trump: media coverage (see chapter 4). Media coverage has frequently pushed presidential primary candidates to the front of the pack. That coverage can be fleeting, however, as some candidates in 2016 discovered. But for Trump, it was not. Trump's ability to generate conflict and controversy—and thereby extraordinary ratings and profits for news organizations—helped him dominate news coverage for much of the primary campaign, and this coverage in turn helped propel him to a lead in the polls and ensure that he stayed there. And even though some coverage was critical—of his personal life, business record, views on issues, and so on—much of it was not. Republican candidates, leaders, and interest groups facilitated Trump's ascendance by failing to attack him early and in earnest.

Finally, Trump succeeded by tapping into long-standing, but often unappreciated, sentiments among Republican voters (see chapter 5). Although many Republican leaders wanted to appeal to racial and ethnic minorities, Trump went in the opposite direction—and capitalized on deep concern about immigration, Islam, and racial diversity among rank-and-file Republicans. Although many Republican leaders wanted cutbacks or dramatic reforms to entitlement programs such as Social Security and Medicare, Trump defended those programs—and capitalized on the underappreciated strain of economic liberalism among many rank-and-file Republicans. On both issues, Trump was actually closer to the views of Republican voters than were other Republican leaders and some other Republican candidates. Rather than trying to move the party—for example, toward an embrace of immigration reform—Trump simply met many Republican voters where they were. In short, the divide between Republican leaders and voters on these issues became a divide on Trump himself, whom few leaders supported but many voters did.

The result was a convincing victory for Trump—and an intensifying identity crisis for the Republican Party.

The “Lessons” of 2012

Election night 2012 shocked many Republicans. Even though conditions in the country and the public polls favored Obama—as did the Romney campaign's own internal polls, for that matter—many Republicans believed that the polls would be wrong. In a Gallup poll conducted ten days before the election, almost three-fourths of Republicans expected Romney to win. Romney

himself had written a victory speech but no concession speech. On that night, Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly responded to Karl Rove's bullishness on Romney's prospects with this pointed question: "Is this just the math you do as a Republican to make yourself feel better or is this real?"⁴

Obama's comfortable win then catalyzed a debate within the Republican Party about what it should do next. According to a study by the political scientist Philip Klinkner, losing parties in presidential elections have addressed one or more of three things: their platform, their organization, and their procedures for nominating candidates. Changes to the platform are hardest, as this necessitates navigating ideological shoals within the party. Instead, losing parties tend to focus on procedures or organization.⁵

After 2012, the GOP's response did center on its party and campaign organization. This can be summarized as "doing better math." For example, in the RNC's postmortem report on the 2012 election—entitled the *Growth and Opportunity Project*—the longest section is on "campaign mechanics." The goal was to close the gap between the Democratic and Republican Parties in how they used data and analytics to increase the efficiency of their fund-raising and voter contact. The RNC's report emphasized the need for "a commitment to greater technology and digital resources" and "a deeper talent pool that understands and can deploy data and technology/digital campaigning."⁶

The Republican Party also revisited the procedures for nominating candidates, just as it had after its loss in 2008. For example, the RNC created a committee to manage the primary debates, which had proliferated. (There were twenty in 2012.) Reince Priebus said, "While I can't always control everyone's mouth, I can control how long we have to kill each other." In 2015–16, there would be twelve debates. The RNC also required that states holding their primaries before March 15 allocate delegates in proportion to each candidate's share of the vote and not on a winner-take-all basis.⁷

But there was little consensus when it came to revisiting the party's policies and platform. Moderates within the party pushed for changes that acknowledged the country's changing demography. The *Growth and Opportunity Project* argued, "The Republican Party must focus its efforts to earn new supporters and voters in the following demographic communities: Hispanic, Asian and Pacific Islanders, African Americans, Indian Americans, Native Americans, women, and youth. . . . Unless the RNC gets serious about tackling this problem, we will lose future elections; the data demonstrates this." The report said that the party "must embrace and champion comprehensive immigration reform" to appeal to Hispanic voters. One of the report's authors, former George W. Bush press secretary Ari Fleischer, said, "We couldn't talk about inclusiveness . . . and then ignore immigration. Otherwise, it would've

rung hollow, I think.”⁸ In short, the report was trying to push the party toward a more liberal position on immigration—even though Republican voters had little desire to do so.

Other Republican leaders echoed these sentiments. Romney’s campaign manager said he regretted Romney’s position on immigration; at one point during the 2012 Republican primary, Romney had suggested that undocumented immigrants “self-deport” to their countries of origins. Two days after the 2012 election, House Speaker John Boehner said that immigration reform was “long overdue.” Even the conservative media personality Sean Hannity advocated for immigration reform: “I think you control the border first. You create a pathway for those people that are here. You don’t say you’ve got to go home. And that is a position that I’ve evolved on.”⁹

But many conservatives rejected the *Growth and Opportunity Project*, perhaps illustrating why bromides about “big tents” are easier than the spade-work of changing platforms. To these conservatives, the problem wasn’t that Romney was too conservative, it was that he wasn’t conservative enough—a “meandering managerial moderate,” as the conservative writer Ben Domenech put it. Rush Limbaugh said, “The Republican Party lost because it’s not conservative.” Texas senator Ted Cruz said, “It is amazing that the wisdom of the chattering class to the Republicans is always, always, always ‘Surrender your principles and agree with the Democrats’ . . . every time Republicans do that we lose.”¹⁰

This divide within the party appeared to grow during Obama’s presidency, casting a shadow on Republican successes in midterm elections. Republicans won a remarkable sixty-three House seats in the 2010 election and thirteen House seats in 2014, earning its largest majority since 1928. After 2014, Republicans also controlled the Senate for the first time since 2006. Although these victories helped Republicans stymie Obama’s legislative agenda, they also illuminated, and even exacerbated, divisions within the party.

The “Knuckleheads”

These divisions emerged soon after the 2010 election. That election saw the rise of the Tea Party, a loose congeries of grassroots groups and national advocacy organizations that vehemently opposed the Obama administration and advocated for conservative policies. Tea Party activism helped push congressional Republicans further to the right. Most of the Republicans newly elected in 2010 were more conservative than the typical Republican who had served previously—and they and many Republican activists opposed many of the workaday compromises typical to legislative life.¹¹ One of

those compromises was raising the debt ceiling—a frequent and necessary occurrence because the federal government continually borrows money. In the summer of 2011 the threat that Congress would not raise the debt ceiling gave rise to concerns that the United States might default on its debt obligations and plummeting economic confidence among Americans (see chapter 2). Ultimately, a compromise measure passed, but it split the Republican caucus.¹²

Another prominent battle involved the signature issue of the Growth and Opportunity Project: immigration reform. The effort to pass immigration reform had foundered in 2007, but the party’s dismal showing among Latinos in the 2012 election gave the effort new momentum. A Senate bill did pass in June 2013 with the support of fourteen Republicans, but it was perceived as too liberal by some House Republicans. Representative Steve King of Iowa warned of immigrant drug mules with “calves the size of cantaloupes because they’re hauling 75 pounds of marijuana across the desert.” Work on a separate House bill then fell apart after the stunning primary defeat of the House majority leader, Eric Cantor, by a little-known economics professor, David Brat, who had attacked Cantor on immigration reform.¹³

A third battle came in October 2013, when the federal government shut down after Congress failed to appropriate funds for government operations. Conservatives like Ted Cruz wanted to use the threat of a shutdown to win changes or delays to the Affordable Care Act. A week before the shutdown, Cruz gave a twenty-one-hour speech to advocate for defunding “Obamacare.” But ultimately Obamacare survived and a bill ending the shutdown passed the House, once again splitting Republicans.

As polls showed that Americans tended to blame Republicans for the shutdown, news accounts described a Republican “civil war” between business groups and the Tea Party. Republican representative Peter King of New York disparaged “Ted Cruz and his whole crazy movement.” Cruz called the bill a “lousy deal,” and conservatives mounted challenges to Republican Senate incumbents like Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky and Thad Cochran of Mississippi in 2014. This was part of a broader pattern: in 2010–14 there was an increase in primary challengers who won at least 25 percent of the vote. And within the Republican Party, many challengers were from the ideological right. Although incumbents usually won—including McConnell and Cochran—the losses of candidates like Cantor commanded the most attention. These primary battles were further evidence of the GOP’s divides.¹⁴

After 2014, the Republican Party’s unified control of both the House and Senate did little to resolve its internecine battles. In the House, a new group—the Freedom Caucus—embodied Tea Party ideals and antagonized John

Boehner, who had allowed votes on bills that many Republicans opposed. Within a year, Boehner resigned from Congress. Boehner's departure set off a halting search for a new Speaker. Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, who had been Mitt Romney's running mate in the 2012 presidential election, reluctantly agreed to serve. At that point, only a third of Republicans in the country approved of the Republican congressional leadership. Before long, Ryan also found himself sparring with the Freedom Caucus. Watching all of this from afar, Boehner called his House Republican opponents "the knuckleheads." For good measure, he called Ted Cruz "Lucifer in the flesh."¹⁵

Republicans on Capitol Hill were a microcosm of the party. There were, to be sure, important areas of consensus. Few Republicans advocated increases in taxes or a large-scale expansion of government entitlements. But the divides illustrated the party's inability to coordinate at the elite level. This was a harbinger of the Republican presidential primary.

The Mischiefs of Faction

Of course, the mere existence of factions within political parties is nothing new. Parties are collections of ambitious politicians whose goals often conflict. Parties are also collections of interest groups with different agendas. Presidential nominations often bring factional battles to the fore because the stakes are so high. William "Boss" Tweed captured these stakes when he said he did not care who "did the electing" as long as he "got to do the nominating."¹⁶

Political parties therefore need a way for factions to negotiate and arrive at some consensus on a presidential nominee. For a long time, this involved bargaining among party leaders, including at the nominating convention once it became a standard practice. After the 1968 election, reforms first in the Democratic Party and soon after in the Republican Party based the allocation of convention delegates to the candidates on voters' choices in primaries and caucuses rather than on deals made by party leaders in proverbial "smoke-filled rooms." As a result, leaders began to use the period before the first caucuses and primaries—the "invisible primary"—to try to coordinate on a nominee. Endorsements by party leaders during the invisible primary served as an important signal about which candidates were more promising. In presidential primaries between 1980 and 2004, endorsements were associated with who was leading the polls as the primaries began and ultimately who won the nomination. The apparent impact of endorsements was greater than that of fund-raising or news coverage. This was the evidence presented in *The Party Decides* and related research.¹⁷

Party leaders are typically seeking a nominee who is ideologically compatible with, or at least satisfactory to, multiple party factions and can win the general election. These two criteria may be in significant tension, as some factions may prefer a candidate whose beliefs make him or her a hard sell to swing voters in a general election. The challenge, then, is for party leaders to balance these competing considerations and coordinate on a candidate. As the invisible primary began in earnest in 2015, it became apparent that the Republican Party would struggle to do this.

This was visible in the sheer number of candidates running: former Florida governor Jeb Bush, surgeon Ben Carson, New Jersey governor Chris Christie, Ted Cruz, businesswoman Carly Fiorina, former Virginia governor Jim Gilmore, Lindsey Graham, former Arkansas governor and 2008 presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal, John Kasich, former New York governor George Pataki, Kentucky senator Rand Paul, former Texas governor and 2012 presidential candidate Rick Perry, Marco Rubio, former Pennsylvania senator and 2012 presidential candidate Rick Santorum, Donald Trump, and Wisconsin governor Scott Walker. In one sense, this crowd was not surprising: potential candidates, particularly well-qualified ones, are choosy about when they run for higher office and will wait until conditions are favorable.¹⁸ Because the 2016 presidential election was one that Republicans could win, lots of candidates threw their hats in the ring. Political observers marveled at what Priebus, among others, called the “deep bench” of the Republican Party.¹⁹

But this proliferation of candidates also suggested a problem. Perhaps the most invisible part of the invisible primary is the work that parties do to discourage candidates from running in the first place. In 2015, at least one prominent Republican—Mitt Romney—flirted with running but did not enter the race because his donors and staffers were lukewarm or supporting other candidates. Nevertheless, the signals being sent by party leaders seemed equivocal enough that many other candidates felt it was worthwhile to run.²⁰

The candidates who ran represented distinct party factions or simply stood outside those factions. Moreover, in at least two of the GOP’s most prominent factions, there were multiple candidates running—further complicating the task of coordination. Paul was the lone representative of a more libertarian philosophy within the party. He had made waves with a March 2013 filibuster protesting the Obama administration’s national security policy, prompting Senator John McCain to call him a “wacko bird.”²¹ Ultimately, the libertarian faction in the GOP is small, which helps explain why Paul did not make much headway during the primary.

Several other candidates stood squarely in the more conservative wing of the party, particularly on issues such as abortion and gay rights. Both Huckabee and Santorum had run for president previously on this platform and had won caucuses or primaries in states, such as Iowa, with more religious and social conservatives. In 2016, Cruz seemed the most prominent candidate from this faction.

Members of the largest group of candidates were somewhat less conservative and better connected to the “establishment”—that is, to other parts of the party’s traditional base, such as business groups. Early on, Jeb Bush was the most prominent of these candidates. Given his family lineage—his father and brother were, of course, the forty-first and forty-third presidents, respectively—and his connections within the party, he was an early front-runner. He announced his “active exploration” of a candidacy on December 16, 2014, and his campaign quickly sought to establish his dominance by locking in supporters and donors in a below-the-radar effort named “shock and awe” after the military doctrine that advocated early and overwhelming force on the battlefield. The early signs for Jeb Bush were good: he and his affiliated political action committee, or super PAC, raised \$114 million in the second quarter of 2015.²²

Challenging Bush were candidates like Christie, Graham, Jindal, Kasich, Rubio, Pataki, and Walker. They were not all similar to Bush or necessarily “establishment” candidates, but their appeal was potentially broader than just to social conservatives. Some of these candidates faced the simple challenge of being unknown to many Republicans. In July 2015, about half or more of Republican voters were not familiar enough with Graham, Kasich, Jindal, Pataki, and Walker to have an opinion about them. This shows how difficult it can be for statewide officeholders to break into the national consciousness. Even Walker, who had made headlines outside Wisconsin after successfully battling to end collective bargaining rights for public-sector unions and then surviving a recall attempt, was familiar to only 52 percent of Republicans.²³ Christie was better known but not better liked: he faced questions about his role in “Bridgagate,” a scandal in which members of his staff had ordered lane closures in Fort Lee, New Jersey, to tie up traffic trying to access the George Washington Bridge and punish the mayor of Fort Lee for not supporting Christie. To many in the party, Christie was “damaged goods.”²⁴

Rubio, by contrast, was better liked. The question, however, was whether he would be able to challenge Bush, whose pedigree was similar in some respects, including not only their Florida home base but also their support for immigration reform. Bush and Rubio had had a decent relationship before the campaign: after Rubio’s Senate victory in 2012, Bush stood at his side and said, “Marco Rubio makes me cry for joy!” But now, Bush and his team

regarded Rubio as a threat, and Rubio found that most Florida political insiders were on Bush's side.²⁵

Candidates without experience in elective office—Carson, Fiorina, and Trump—seemed to be in another category, sometimes labeled “the outsiders.” This label actually understates how much these candidates had sought to ingratiate themselves with insiders. Carson, after retiring from a storied career as a neurosurgeon, polished his bona fides within the party by becoming a prominent critic of Obama—something that had additional resonance because Carson was himself black—and speaking to conservative groups and writing for conservative outlets. Fiorina, the former CEO of Hewlett-Packard, had advised John McCain's 2008 campaign, worked for the RNC and American Conservative Union Foundation, and run unsuccessfully for the U.S. Senate in California in 2010.

Trump had not been a loyal partisan of any kind. As Trump said about his real estate projects, “When you need zone changes, you're political. . . . You know, I'll support the Democrats, the Republicans, whatever the hell I have to support.” Bill and Hillary Clinton were even guests at his wedding to Melania Trump in 2005.²⁶ But in 2009, Trump registered as a Republican and tried to win Republicans' support. Amid his “birther” crusade against Obama in 2011, Trump flirted with a presidential run and even briefly led in the polls for the Republican nomination. He spoke at the Conservative Political Action Conference. He was a frequent guest on Fox News. He eventually endorsed Mitt Romney in 2012, although he was irked that Romney did not do more to embrace him. After 2012, he started meeting with Republican strategists and donating more to Republican candidates and party organizations. To be sure, Trump was no Republican regular—and would routinely criticize the party and threaten to run as an independent in 2016—but nevertheless he worked to build his appeal within the party ahead of his presidential campaign.²⁷

In many previous Republican presidential primaries, a fractious and diverse field produced a more moderate or “establishment” candidate as the nominee, even if other candidates won some individual caucuses and primaries. Nominees who fit this pattern include Bob Dole in 1996, George W. Bush in 2000, John McCain in 2008, and Mitt Romney in 2012. But there was no coalescing around such a candidate for the 2016 nomination.

This was perhaps most visible in whether and whom Republican Party leaders endorsed during the invisible primary. Endorsements during the invisible primary are particularly telling. It is easy for a party leader to wait and see who is leading after the first few caucuses and primaries and then jump on that candidate's bandwagon. It is costlier for leaders to stick out their necks and endorse before voters have begun to weigh in.

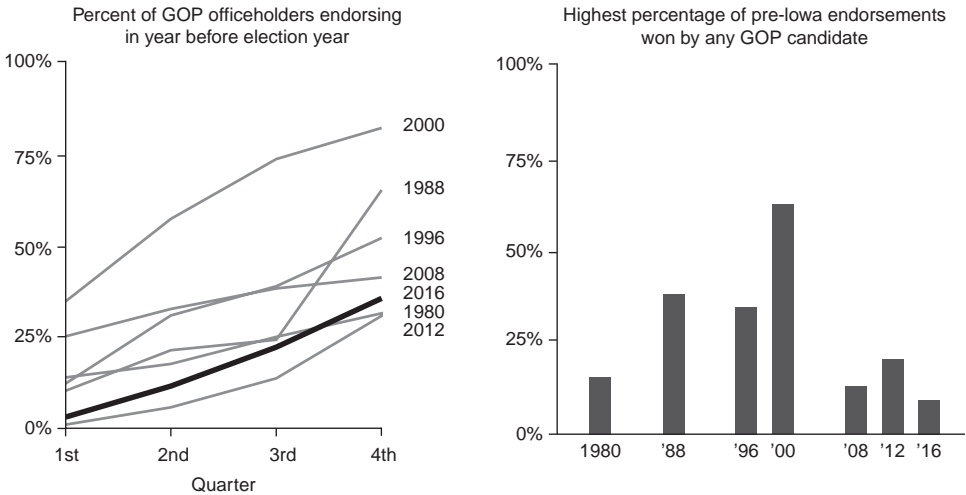


Figure 3.2.

Endorsements of Republican presidential candidates by Republican governors, senators, and U.S. House members.

Any endorsements received before the year preceding the election year are counted in the first quarter of that year. Any endorsements that came in the election year, but before the Iowa caucus, are counted in the fourth quarter of the prior year.

What distinguished 2016 was, first, the relatively slow pace of endorsements (see left-hand panel of figure 3.2). By the eve of the Iowa caucus, only 35 percent of sitting Republican governors, senators, and U.S. House members had endorsed any of these Republican candidates. This was slightly higher than in the period preceding the Iowa caucus in both 1980 and 2012, but it was lower than the average. And because there were far more Republican candidates running in 2015 than in 1979 or 2011, it arguably should have been easier for Republican leaders to find a candidate to endorse. But most stayed on the sidelines.

There was also no consensus on which candidate to endorse, which is captured by the percent of endorsements won by the candidate with the most pre-Iowa endorsements (see right-hand panel of figure 3.2). In earlier years, there was never complete consensus, of course. George W. Bush stands out in 2000 for having won almost two-thirds of the possible endorsements. But in 2008, 2012, and especially 2016, the Republican Party did not coalesce as fully around a single candidate. All of this was unusual. In previous primaries, Republican elites were more likely than Democrats to make endorsements and unify around one or two candidates.²⁸

What distinguished 2016 from 2012, however, was that no candidate got anything close to a majority of the endorsements (see this chapter's appendix

for full endorsements data). In 2011, when even more Republicans were on the sidelines, most of the endorsements went to the eventual nominee, Romney. By contrast, 2016 looked more like 2008, with the endorsements spread more evenly across the candidates and no clear front-runner. In 2016, the three candidates with the most endorsements were Bush, Rubio, and Cruz. No Republican governor, senator, or member of the House endorsed Carson or Trump during the invisible primary; only three endorsed Fiorina. Of course, none of these candidates would say publicly that this was a problem. In October 2015, one of Carson's senior staff said, "We haven't gotten a single damn endorsement and we don't care." This is a typical refrain from candidates with few or no endorsements. In 2011, GOP candidate Jon Huntsman said that "nobody cares" about endorsements.²⁹

Factionalism in the Republican Party was manifest even among the few members of Congress who did endorse a candidate (figure 3.3). On average, the members of Congress who endorsed Bush, Rubio, Cruz, or Paul were located at different places on the two dimensions underlying much of the roll-call voting in Congress: the standard liberal-conservative dimension and a dimension that helps capture the party's "insider" or "establishment" wing and the "outsider" or "insurgent" wing, which was visible on issues like the debt ceiling. Bush's supporters tended to be more moderate, based on their scores on the liberal-conservative dimension. Rubio's were clustered around the average Republican on both dimensions. Cruz's endorsers tended to be toward the right on the liberal-conservative dimension—although they were not as conservative as Cruz himself—and, like Cruz, tended to score as "outsiders" on the other dimension. Paul's endorsers were scattered across the ideological map. In short, the lack of an early consensus on a presidential front-runner was rooted in the same fissures that had divided the Republican Party before the primary campaign got under way.³⁰

This indecision and lack of consensus in the Republican Party showed up among state legislators and donors as well. Only 20 percent of Republican state legislators endorsed a Republican presidential candidate before the Iowa caucuses, and no candidate was endorsed by more than 5 percent of state legislators. Donors also sat on their hands. As of the summer of 2015, many Republican donors had not given to any candidate. Among those who had, most were "hedging their bets" and giving to multiple candidates.³¹

Many Republican candidates were therefore able to raise enough money to be competitive. This illustrates one feature of the modern nominating system: the ability of candidates to raise money despite having little support from party leaders. Although it surprised no one that Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio raised plenty of money—\$156 million and \$163 million, respectively, combining their campaign committees and affiliated super PACs—even more striking

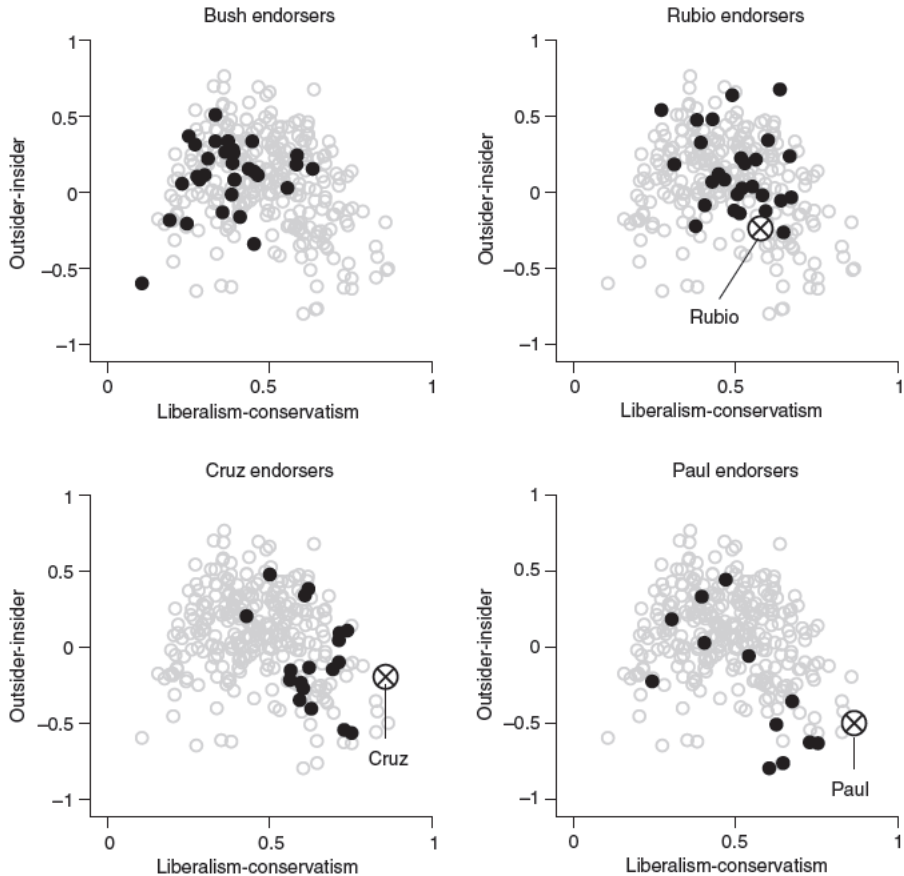


Figure 3.3.

The ideological location of presidential candidate endorsers in Congress.

The graph includes pre-Iowa endorsements by Senators and House members in the 114th Congress. “Liberalism-conservatism” is measured with first-dimension NOMINATE scores and “outsider-insider” status with second-dimension NOMINATE scores. Dark circles indicate endorsers and gray circles indicate other members of Congress.

was the fund-raising of candidates like Carson and Cruz. Carson raised \$82 million, mainly from a network of small donors, often solicited via direct mail and telemarketing. Cruz raised \$143 million through a network of both smaller donors and wealthy conservatives. Ultimately, campaign cash in 2016 resembled the endorsements: neither clearly favored a single presumptive nominee. The pattern looked different in 2012, when both the early money and endorsements suggested Romney was the front-runner.³²

The upshot of the 2016 invisible primary was that party insiders could not identify one single candidate who stood above the others on both criteria: satisfactory on the issues and electable in November. This was different from four years earlier, when 2011 polls of Republican activists and party officials in Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina showed that few candidates or potential candidates were viewed more favorably on both criteria compared to the eventual nominee, Romney—including Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann, Newt Gingrich, and Rick Perry.³³

In 2015, however, the picture was muddier. In a July 2015 national survey of the most politically active Republican voters, majorities or near majorities believed that Walker (61%), Rubio (58%), Bush (57%), Carson (47%), Perry (42%), and Cruz (40%) were acceptable to most Republicans. They were less confident in these candidates' ability to win the general election, but a majority believed that Walker or Rubio could win. Notably, only about a quarter said that Trump was acceptable to most Republicans or could win the November election. Ultimately, there seemed to be more candidates who could be acceptable to most party factions and capable of winning the general election—and no one candidate was the first choice of more than 18 percent of these activists. This presaged Republicans' struggle to identify an alternative to Trump once he was leading.³⁴

Despite this indecision, the invisible primary still had some of its traditional consequences. It began the winnowing process, as five Republican candidates dropped out between September and December 2015: Jindal, Graham, Pataki, Perry, and Walker. Walker was the most surprising. Early in the campaign, he was described as “having a moment.” But in the first debate, on August 6, 2015, Walker turned in what was deemed a “tentative performance,” which in turn led to anemic fund-raising. His performance in the second debate was described as “not the breakthrough moment his supporters had hoped to see.” His campaign had built a large operation that now it could not fund. Walker decided that he would not run “a deficit campaign.”³⁵

But even with the field narrowing, the party's factionalism made it harder for any single candidate to “win” the invisible primary. For a candidate like Trump, there was an opportunity that long-shot candidates in most previous primaries did not have. Republican voters had received no clear signal about who the front-runner was or should be.

The resulting uncertainty meant that this signal needed to come from somewhere else. It was news media coverage that would fill this void.

CHAPTER 4

“The Daily Donald Show”

Since I began covering presidential campaigns in 1980, I can think of nothing as unfair as the disproportionate media attention that has been lavished on Trump from the beginning.

—Walter Shapiro, *Roll Call*, January 14, 2016

It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS.

—Les Moonves, chairman, president, and
CEO of CBS Corporation

Someone watching CNN on the afternoon of March 19, 2016, would have seen an odd sight: an empty stage. It would eventually be the scene of a Donald Trump rally. But nothing was happening at that moment. The political commentator Josh Jordan tweeted, “Not only are the networks still covering the Trump rallies live and uninterrupted, they are showing the empty stage/introductions live.” *New York Times* reporter Jonathan Martin chimed in, tweeting, “How many Hillary events get this coverage?” His implication, of course, was that few did.¹

This episode was not even the first time that week that cable news outlets had paid more attention to a Trump event, or even to the period before a Trump event, than to another candidate's event that was unfolding at the same time. Several days prior, cable networks did not carry a Bernie Sanders speech, instead featuring a panel of pundits while the chyron at the bottom of the screen said “awa iti ng t rump” and “st anding by for t rump.” And the week

before, the same thing had happened to Hillary Clinton, whose speech was not aired in favor of extended coverage of a Trump press conference where he insulted other candidates and reporters and promoted Trump-branded steaks, wine, vodka, and water.²

This attention to Trump was hardly unusual. Trump dominated news coverage almost from the moment he entered the race, and news coverage helped make him the front-runner among Republican voters—even while he remained anathema to most Republican leaders. Trump did it by providing what news organizations and consumers wanted. He eschewed anodyne talking points and hackneyed anecdotes for braggadocio, verbal fisticuffs, and controversial policy stands. All of this made Trump consistently newsworthy. His Republican opponents often found themselves struggling for airtime, except when they tangled with Trump.

Trump was also helped by the focus of news coverage. Although some news stories scrutinized Trump's record and questioned his views on policy, more prevalent was typical "horse race" coverage of an unusual candidate beating the odds—or a "winner," as Trump might have said. Changing this narrative would have necessitated extraordinary measures from Trump's opponents. But instead of attacking Trump, they mainly sat on their hands, or perhaps clasped them to pray that Trump would simply go away. There were not sustained attacks on Trump until late in the primary campaign. Meanwhile, many party leaders continued to equivocate about an alternative to Trump, rallying only late to Marco Rubio.

The irony is that Trump was not invulnerable. Several of his controversial remarks hurt him with Republican voters, and as of the start of the caucuses and primaries, he was not even the most liked Republican candidate. But months of dominating the news with little pushback from his opponents left Trump at the front of the pack. From there, it was a relatively easy path to the nomination.

Conferring Status

The centrality of news coverage to presidential nominations is nothing new. The reforms that elevated the importance of voters' choices in primaries and caucuses made any channel of communication with voters more important. In 1983, the political scientist Nelson Polsby argued that "the proliferation of primaries weakens the influence of state and local politicians on the choice of delegates and increases the influence of the news media." This is particularly true when politicians and other party leaders do not send clear signals about the preferred nominee, as in 2016. It has become even truer as news coverage of the early invisible primary has increased.³

Clear signals are important because nominations often present a challenging task for voters. There can be lots of candidates, some of whom are familiar only to political cognoscenti. How, then, is a voter to know which candidates are “good”? Which candidates have adequate experience? Which candidates have beliefs that a voter shares? Which candidates can win the general election? Voters need information to answer these questions, and news coverage helps to supply it.

Scholars have long noted the importance of the media in situations very much like a presidential primary. In a classic 1948 paper, Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton described how the media can “confer status” on individuals: “The mass media bestow prestige and enhance the authority of individuals and groups by legitimizing their status. Recognition by the press or radio or magazines or newsreels testifies that one has arrived, that one is important enough to have been singled out from the large anonymous masses, that one’s behavior and opinions are significant enough to require public notice.”⁴ News coverage of primary elections today performs this precise function. Candidates who meet standards of “newsworthiness” garner coverage. Because news coverage of campaigns typically focuses on the horse race—which candidates are winning and losing, their campaign strategies, and the like—candidates will earn more coverage when they raise large sums of money or do unexpectedly well in preelection polls or early primaries and caucuses. News coverage also features events that are novel—such as when a candidate first announces his or her candidacy—and episodes that make for good stories, with compelling characters and conflicts. When candidates succeed by any of these metrics, even if they have been largely ignored to that point, they will be suddenly “discovered” by media outlets and, therefore, by the public. Their poll numbers will increase. For example, in the 2012 Republican primary, businessman Herman Cain’s unexpected victory in a nonbinding straw poll of Florida Republicans catapulted him into the news, as news outlets judged this largely meaningless event a surprise “upset” over then-front-runner Rick Perry. Cain’s poll numbers spiked.⁵

Of course, good poll numbers themselves justify further news coverage, which can create a self-reinforcing cycle. But for many candidates, this cycle is broken by coverage that is negative. New front-runners tend to attract additional scrutiny from news outlets, which seek to learn more about candidates who previously have been covered little if at all. For Cain, this meant scrutiny of his political views and coverage of accusations of sexual harassment and marital infidelity.

Many primary candidates, then, experience a cycle of “discovery, scrutiny, and decline” as their poll numbers fall, often for good. The decline can be the direct result of the scrutiny, but it is also sometimes the result of the next candidate’s “discovery.” To be sure, not every candidate may experience

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this cycle. Some are never discovered and languish in obscurity. Others, like Mitt Romney in 2012, have already been “discovered”—Romney had run in 2008—and never experience sharp ups or downs in news coverage or polls for much of the primary season.

In the 2016 Republican primary, the conditions described by Lazarsfeld and Merton were very much in place. A seventeen-candidate field is pretty close to a “large anonymous mass,” which makes “singling out” all the more important. One candidate—Trump—benefited the most.

“He Made Great Copy”

Two sources of data show Trump’s dominance of news coverage in the 2016 primaries. The first consists of stories collected from a set of twenty-four prominent news outlets, including major broadcast television networks (CBS, NBC, ABC, and PBS), cable news networks (CNN, Fox, and MSNBC), radio (National Public Radio and the *Hugh Hewitt Show*), websites (*Huffington Post*, *Politico*, and *Breitbart*), and twelve of the country’s largest newspapers.⁶ The social analytics firm Crimson Hexagon collected all stories that both mentioned at least one Republican candidate’s name and used the phrase “presidential campaign.” As a shorthand, call these data “news stories.”

The second source of data consists of all mentions of the Republican presidential candidates that aired on a set of national cable networks: Al Jazeera America, Bloomberg, CNBC, CNN, Comedy Central, Fox Business, Fox News, LinkTV, and MSNBC. Although this set of outlets is perhaps less diverse, using mentions of the candidates within stories rather than the stories themselves allows us to measure more carefully the volume of attention each candidate received. These data stem from a partnership between the Internet Archive’s Television News Archive and the GDELT (Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone) Project.⁷ As a shorthand, call these data “cable mentions.”

The most striking thing is how much coverage Trump received (figure 4.1). From May 1, 2015, to April 30, 2016, Trump’s median share of cable mentions was 52 percent. In other words, he received about half of the mentions, on average, and the other Republican candidates split the rest. In the 305 days between July 1, 2015, and April 30, 2016, Trump received the most cable mentions on 295 of them. Trump was mentioned in about 25 percent of the “news stories,” on average, and had the highest share of coverage for 280 of the 305 days. This 25 percent figure may undercount the attention Trump received because the news story data do not capture how much of the story focused on Trump as opposed to other candidates. It may also be true that cable net-

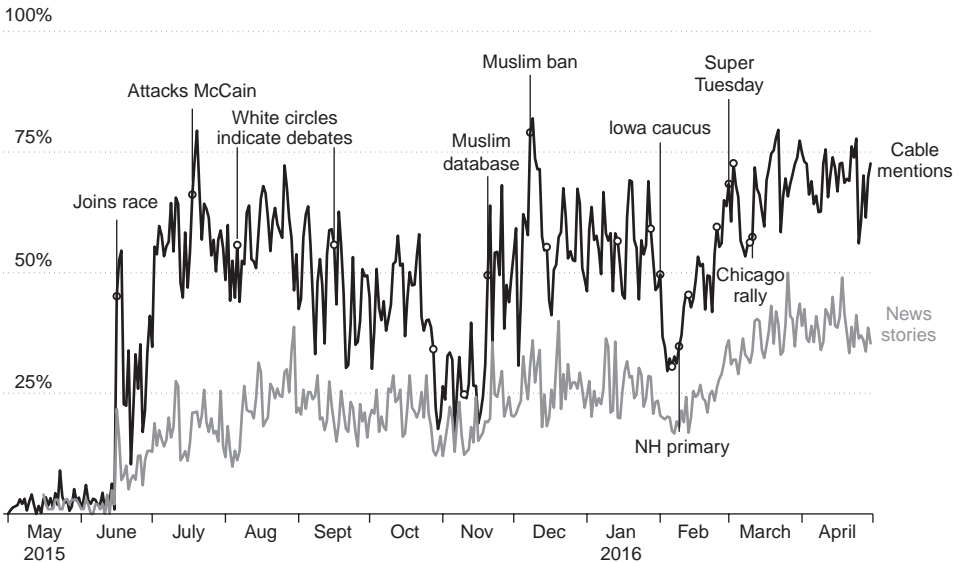


Figure 4.1.

Donald Trump's share of news coverage during the Republican primary.

White circles indicate debates.

Source: Internet Archive and GDELT; Crimson Hexagon.

works had a stronger incentive to devote attention to Trump, given the need to attract audiences across many hours of programming. But in both sources of data, Trump's dominance of coverage is clear.⁸

News coverage of Trump was powerfully correlated with his standing in national polls (figure 4.2). After smoothing both trends to remove day-to-day noise and focus on the underlying signal, the correlation was 0.94. (The maximum possible correlation is 1.0.) The correlation between Trump's poll standing and share of cable mentions was also high (0.80).⁹

Of course, this raises the question, Was the news driving Trump's poll numbers, or were Trump's poll numbers driving the news, or perhaps some of both? There is no doubt that the initial spike in Trump's poll numbers was driven by news coverage (see figure 4.2). Americans do not change their minds about a candidate for no reason or absent new information. In a YouGov/*Economist* poll conducted between June 13 and June 15, 2015—immediately before Trump's announcement—only 2 percent of Republican registered voters supported him. In a YouGov/*Economist* poll conducted one week later, 11 percent did. But as the campaign proceeded, there was influence in both directions—from news coverage to poll numbers, and from poll numbers to news coverage. This is true for Trump and the other Republican candidates.

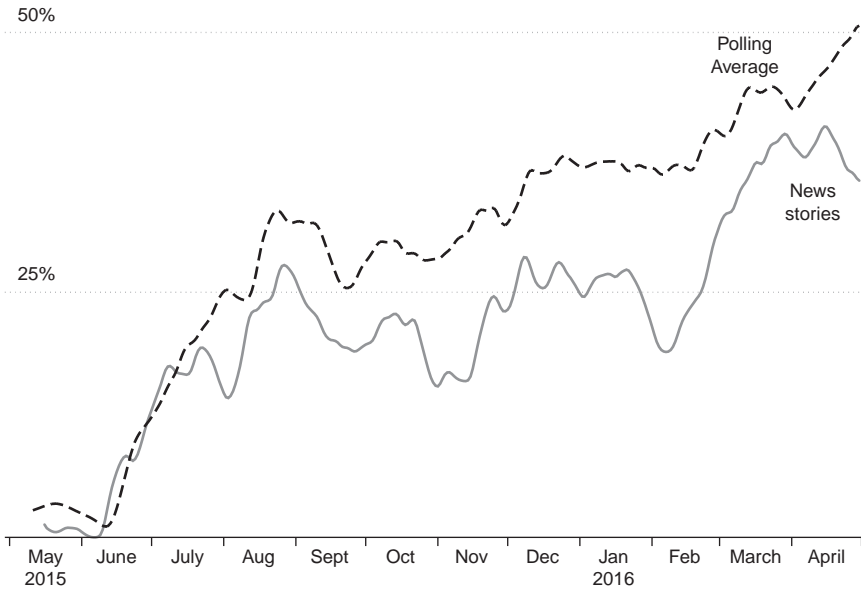


Figure 4.2.

Trends in Donald Trump’s national polling average and news coverage.

Both trends have been smoothed using lowess (bandwidth = 0.05). This makes each day’s value roughly a three-week centered average, with days further “away” in that three-week period counting for less than days closer to the day in question.

Source: Crimson Hexagon; Pollster.

Voters depend on the news for signals as to which candidates deserve attention and support—and, in turn, news outlets calibrate their coverage based in part on how well candidates are doing in the polls. For Trump, his rise was facilitated by the volume of coverage that he received, and the volume of coverage was in turn influenced by Republican voters’ increasing affinity for him.¹⁰

Why did Trump receive so much coverage? One answer is the self-reinforcing cycle of news coverage and polls, but this is only part of the story. After all, other candidates experienced that same cycle, albeit briefly. Another part of the story is how Trump expertly played to the economic incentives and news values of media outlets. News organizations are part of for-profit companies, and Trump was good for business. The news media value things that make for “good stories”—interesting characters, novelty, drama, conflict, and controversy—and Trump supplied those in spades.¹¹ Indeed, Trump had long understood how to generate news coverage. As he wrote in *The Art of*

the Deal, “Bad publicity is sometimes better than no publicity at all. Controversy, in short, sells.”¹²

For years, Trump’s exploits had been judged newsworthy. This began with his early business dealings and romantic relationships—for example, he was on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* in 1984—and it continued when NBC gave him his own reality television show. Before he ran for president, news outlets, especially Fox News, put Trump on the air and helped validate him as a political figure. During the campaign, some commentators argued that Trump’s preexisting celebrity means that news coverage could not have helped him that much. “The media didn’t create Trump,” the argument went. In fact, no person becomes a celebrity *without* media coverage. As one former New York tabloid writer, Susan Mulcahy, put it, “I helped make the myth of Donald Trump. We didn’t see it at the time, but item by inky item we were turning him into a New York icon.” Neil Barsky, who covered Trump’s business career in the 1980s and 1990s as a reporter at the *Wall Street Journal*, said, “Then and now, we in the media helped enable the Trump myth. He made great copy. Early on, I noticed that any article I wrote about him—whether for the tabloid Daily News or the serious Wall Street Journal—would get great play. This invariably led me and others to dig deeper for Trump news.”¹³

Trump’s celebrity status ensured that the announcement of his candidacy would get more coverage than that of a more obscure candidate, even one with more conventional credentials. On the day Trump announced his candidacy, he was mentioned in 22 percent of these news stories and received 45 percent of the mentions of the Republican candidates on these cable networks. This spike was larger than what most other candidates received after their announcements, which may reflect the controversy that Trump stirred with his remarks that day, including a reference to “rapists” coming from Mexico.¹⁴ This was Trump’s moment of “discovery”—not in the literal sense but rather as a candidate for the nomination.

Once he was in the race, Trump was focused on getting the coverage he was accustomed to getting before running for president. There was some irony here, given that in 1980 Trump had said that television was bad for politics (“It’s hurt the process very much”). But as a candidate, Trump sought media attention and monitored television coverage especially closely. One reporter chronicled how Trump spent most of a three-hour flight watching himself on television—flipping around the channels, judging cable news pundits based on whether they supported him, and commenting on rebroadcasts of his own speeches (“very presidential”). Trump also made himself available to media outlets in a way that other candidates would not.¹⁵

But arguably what mattered more than Trump's sheer availability was what he said on air. As one CNN source put it, "He'll throw a hand grenade in, and then will come on to talk to us about it."¹⁶ The "grenades" reflected Trump's penchant for the controversial remarks and blistering attacks that aligned with news values such as novelty, drama, and conflict. Many spikes in coverage were not the result of Trump simply sitting for an interview but rather a consequence of what he had said specifically. For example, Trump's comments about "rapists" from Mexico led to a second round of news coverage in late June as corporations began severing their business relationships with him. Univision announced that it would not air the Miss USA or Miss Universe pageants, both produced by Trump. NBC announced that it would no longer air the pageants or Trump's show *The Apprentice*. Macy's dropped his clothing line. Naturally, Trump fired back on Twitter: "Why doesn't somebody study the horrible charges brought against @Macys for racial profiling? Terrible hypocrites!"¹⁷

The dustup with Macy's was, by the standards of Trump controversies, a relatively minor one. On July 18, Trump criticized Republican senator John McCain, who as a navy pilot in the Vietnam War had spent five harrowing years in Vietnamese prisons after his plane was shot down and he was captured. Trump said, "He's not a war hero. He's a war hero because he was captured. I like people who weren't captured." This drew widespread condemnation, including from many Republicans.¹⁸ Two days after his comment, Trump commanded nearly 80 percent of the cable network mentions of the candidates (figure 4.1).

In the first televised debate, on August 6, 2015, Trump tangled with Fox News' Megyn Kelly, who was helping to moderate the debate and asked Trump a pointed question about his previous insults of women, such as "fat pigs." After the debate, Trump attacked Kelly, saying, "There was blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever"—a remark interpreted as implying that Kelly was menstruating. Trump's share of coverage shot up: on cable networks, from 44 percent the day before the debate to 64 percent five days later.

This pattern repeated itself. Trump would say something controversial, inflammatory, or insulting, and he would receive a spike in coverage. A week after terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015, Trump appeared to endorse a database of Muslims living in the United States, although at other times he suggested that the database would be for refugees from countries like Syria. After a terrorist attack in San Bernardino, California, on December 2, Trump went further, calling for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States"—a proposal that, again, attracted strong bipartisan criticism and, again, substantial news coverage.¹⁹

Over and over again, Trump’s comments allowed him to, as Fox News anchor Bret Baier put it, “contort the day’s media stories.” Waiting for the next grenade, cable television outlets not only covered Trump rallies, and even the empty stage beforehand, but at times acquiesced to Trump’s demands about how he was covered—allowing him to call in rather than appear in person and even dictate camera placement at his events. In short, a political junkie could do what Trump did himself: binge-watch the Trump campaign in real time.²⁰

Those decisions occasioned not a little hand-wringing, including within the media. But it was harder to argue with the consequences: viewers, ratings, and profits. Ratings may have led Fox News to make peace with Trump after he attacked Megyn Kelly: Fox News hosts were worried their ratings would suffer if Trump boycotted the network. Other news executives were even more forthcoming about the economic value of covering Trump. Jim VandeHei, formerly of *Politico*, said that Trump was “great box office.” CNN president Jeff Zucker “was beaming,” according to one news report, and described the network’s ratings by saying, “These numbers are crazy—crazy.” The numbers were why Leslie Moonves said, “It may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS.”²¹

Journalists sometimes did not like the argument that news coverage gave Trump a boost. For example, *Politico*’s Jack Shafer seemed to vacillate between acknowledging that “the press helped ‘create’ the surge that has carried Trump to his current status as the Republican Party’s front-runner” (September 2015) and constructing an elaborate straw man by which the media could only help a candidate if there was a “media conspiracy” or a “candidate-promoting media cabal” (March 2016).²² But there need not be any cabal at all—only a set of news outlets that, though not identical, made many decisions based on a common set of economic incentives and news values. In 2016, those incentives and values aligned nicely, and Donald Trump was the beneficiary.

Gasping for Air

And what about the other candidates? The reporter McKay Coppins put it well: “the daily Donald show sucked up the media oxygen,” and “the rest of the Republican presidential candidates were left desperately gasping for air.”²³ Most other candidates had, at best, limited success garnering news coverage and benefiting from the consequent rise in their poll numbers. This was often because the coverage was temporary, driven by one-off events like a good debate performance or a good poll in Iowa. The other candidates also faced this conundrum: they often made the most news because of a

confrontation with Trump. Sometimes this happened when a candidate tried, usually unsuccessfully, to beat Trump at his own game of controversy and insults. At other times, Trump initiated the confrontation. Either way, the news environment revolved around Trump.

Trump's advantage is visible, for example, in cable network mentions of him and four of his competitors: Ben Carson, Jeb Bush, Rubio, and Ted Cruz (figure 4.3). Only Carson made a real dent in coverage of Trump, but not for long. Carson's trajectory was emblematic of "discovery, scrutiny, and decline."²⁴ After an initial spike in coverage when he announced his candidacy, Carson received little coverage until a spike in his Iowa poll numbers after an early blitz of television advertisements there. This constituted the "discovery" of Carson, and by the end of September, Carson was polling second behind Trump and occasionally even ahead of him. There was talk of Carson's "quiet surge."²⁵

Then the scrutiny began. There was coverage of controversies involving Carson—such as when he said, "I would not advocate that we put a Muslim in charge of this nation." There was also scrutiny of Carson's record. Reporters noted his tenuous grasp of policy and questioned aspects of his biography, such as his claim that as a youth he tried to stab a friend in the stomach only to have the friend's belt buckle deflect the knife, or his claim he had received a "full scholarship" from West Point, even though he had never applied to the military academy, which does not give full scholarships anyway. At this point, Carson's coverage exceeded that of Trump for several days. Then came the decline. Carson received less news coverage. His polling numbers dropped. At the beginning of 2016, Carson overhauled his campaign, but he never performed exceptionally well in a caucus or primary and dropped out of the race on March 4, 2016.²⁶

Meanwhile, Jeb Bush's campaign never lived up to the potential suggested by his pedigree, experience, and fund-raising. Bush stumbled in May 2015 when he struggled to say whether in hindsight he would have supported the Iraq War, which was begun and championed by his brother. One news report said, "Jeb Bush had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad week." On the day he announced his candidacy in June, some reporting said that Bush was "sorely lacking in pep" and that "the ordeal" of campaigning "was wearing on him." Later Trump called Bush "low energy," a charge that was amplified by news accounts noting—and thereby ensuring—that this attack "stuck to Bush like glue." In fact, Bush's largest spike in news coverage came when he and Trump feuded after Trump criticized George W. Bush because the 9/11 attacks had occurred on his watch. By late fall, Bush's fund-raising and poll standing were ebbing. One news report summed it up: "No more 'shock and awe.'" At a campaign stop a week before the New Hampshire

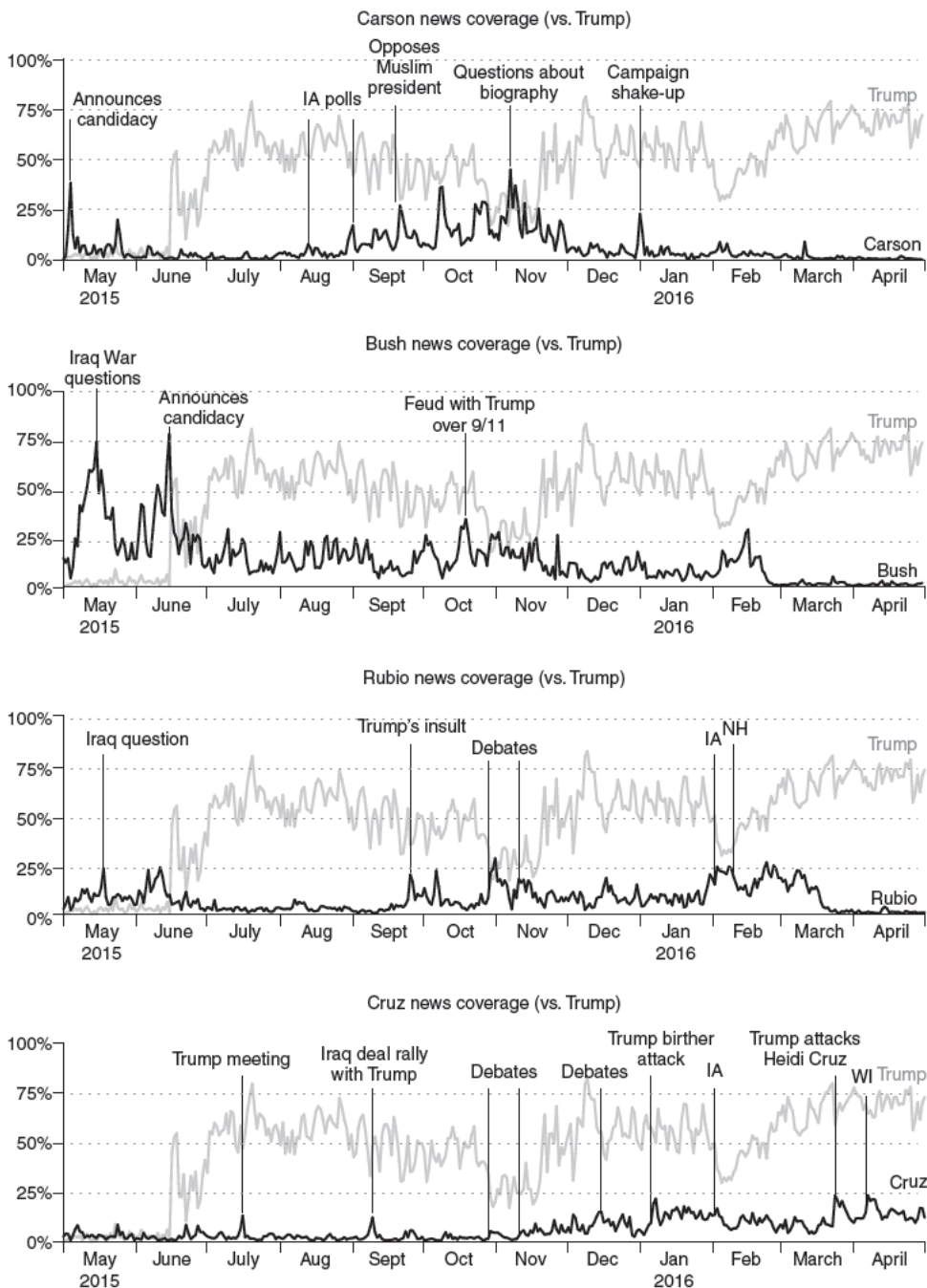


Figure 4.3.
 Republican candidates' shares of cable mentions.
 Sources: Internet Archive and GDELT.

primary, Bush resorted to asking his audience for applause, saying, “Please clap.” He ultimately placed fourth. A late campaign stop by George W. Bush made little difference in the South Carolina primary. On February 20, Bush dropped out of the race. In March, he endorsed Ted Cruz.²⁷

Trump’s ability to dominate news coverage was a particular problem for Marco Rubio. His campaign was predicated less on building a top-notch ground campaign that could mobilize existing Rubio supporters and more on using news coverage—“free” media—to persuade voters to support him. His campaign used quantitative data and statistical models to determine the media markets where Rubio should schedule visits, in hopes that these visits would generate local news coverage and, ultimately, additional vote share and delegates. Trump upended all of that, preventing Rubio from getting the coverage his campaign was depending on.²⁸

Like Bush, Rubio had early stumbles. Rubio also struggled to explain his position on the Iraq War—which the *Washington Post*’s Chris Cillizza called “the most painful 180 seconds of Marco Rubio’s presidential campaign so far.” Rubio faced scrutiny for his finances, including the patronage of a wealthy Florida businessman, and even his speeding tickets—creating spikes of coverage in June as these stories broke. Then, again like Bush, Rubio received less coverage and saw his poll numbers drop thanks to Trump’s entry in the race. Rubio rebounded when his performances in the fall debates were judged favorably. He even appeared to benefit from a tangle with Trump, who criticized Rubio during a speech at the September 25 Values Voters Summit (“this clown, Marco Rubio”) only to be booed. By the end of November, Rubio’s poll numbers were back to where they were in May.²⁹

Rubio then showed that something other than Ben Carson could knock Trump out of the news, at least relatively speaking: losing. In the Iowa caucus, Rubio beat the expectations set by late polls, while Trump underperformed. By placing second to Cruz while Trump came in third, Rubio got a bump in coverage and in his national poll numbers. Trump’s share of news coverage dropped sharply. Rubio’s odds of winning the nomination in the prediction markets jumped from 33 percent to 60 percent.³⁰

However, Rubio struggled to build on this momentum—even though, finally, some Republican leaders got off the sidelines and endorsed him. After Iowa, Rubio picked up forty additional endorsements from Republican senators, governors, and members of the House, while Cruz picked up twenty-five and Trump picked up fifteen. This gave Rubio sixty-six total endorsements, which was more than any other candidate. But in the debate immediately before the New Hampshire primary, Chris Christie attacked Rubio for repeating scripted talking points—something Rubio then proceeded to do moments later by repeatedly using the exact same attack line against Barack

Obama. Christie’s attack, plus others, led to headlines like “Did Marco Rubio Squander His Big Moment?”³¹ Of course, headlines like that are often self-fulfilling prophecies, and Rubio ended up finishing fourth in the primary while Trump won handily. His news coverage then dropped, as did his polling numbers—from 15 percent to 10 percent in Morning Consult surveys conducted before and after the primary. Rubio rebounded somewhat, coming in second in the South Carolina primary and Nevada caucus, but on Super Tuesday, he won only one of the eleven contests. His polling numbers began to slide, and there was no obvious way for him to eat into Trump’s delegate lead. After finishing a distant second to Trump in Rubio’s own home state of Florida, he dropped out on March 15, 2016.

The experience of Ted Cruz also illustrated how candidates often needed to engage with Trump to get substantial news coverage. Early on, Cruz got little coverage except when he and Trump met on July 16—Cruz complimented Trump, saying, “Donald and I are friends,” and, “I like Donald because he’s brash, he’s bold, and he speaks the truth”—and when he and Trump both spoke at a rally denouncing the Obama administration’s deal to limit Iran’s nuclear program. Cruz seemed to believe that if he made nice with Trump, he could win over Trump’s supporters if Trump bowed out. When both spoke out against the Iran nuclear deal, they were described as having a “relatively cozy relationship.”³²

But that would change as Cruz’s poll standing increased after his performances in the fall debates were judged favorably. Indeed, Cruz’s experience showed that the debates often produced news coverage for other candidates more than for Trump. This was ironic, given that the Republican National Committee—no friend of Trump’s—had reduced the number of primary debates, hoping to make the eventual nominee’s path smoother. By December, there were headlines like “It’s Cruz, Not Trump, Who Looks More like the Favorite to Win the GOP Nomination.” Then two predictable things happened. One was additional scrutiny from the news media, such as about Cruz’s unpopularity among his Senate colleagues. The other was attacks from Trump—and therefore more surges in coverage of Cruz. In early January, Cruz got news coverage because Trump questioned his citizenship status. (Cruz was born in Calgary to a Cuban father and American mother, making him a U.S. citizen by birth.) Trump later suggested that Cruz’s father, Rafael, was somehow involved in a conspiracy to kill President John F. Kennedy. On March 23, after a group supporting Cruz made a campaign ad that featured an old photo of a scantily clad Melania Trump, Trump himself tweeted, “Be careful, Lyin’ Ted, or I will spill the beans on your wife,” to which Cruz replied via Twitter, “Donald, if you try to attack Heidi, you’re more of a coward than I thought.”³³

Despite the scrutiny and attacks, Cruz had some successes, winning eleven caucuses and primaries. After Carson's withdrawal, Cruz consolidated a bit more support. His poll numbers hit 25 percent, and he won a few more primaries, most notably in Wisconsin. But despite these wins, and despite gambits like announcing Carly Fiorina as his running mate were he nominated, Cruz fell further and further behind Trump in the delegate count. Along with John Kasich, he was one of the last two candidates standing, and Cruz and Kasich even discussed a coordinated strategy to deny Trump the nomination. But the plan never came to fruition. Cruz withdrew his candidacy on May 3, as did Kasich the following day.³⁴

Ultimately, the experiences of the Republican candidates other than Trump showed that it was possible to get media attention and chip away at Trump's dominance of the news and his lead in the polls. But this was often fleeting—the result of short-lived coverage of a debate or some other horse race metric. Moreover, several candidates experienced notable spikes in news coverage only because Trump had attacked them, showing again how reliably he could set the media's agenda.

Did Trump Receive Too Much Coverage?

Trump's dominance of news coverage gave rise to a heated debate about whether he received too much coverage. Certainly his Republican opponents thought so. In December 2015, Jeb Bush told reporters that Trump was playing them “like a fine Stradivarius violin,” and John Kasich said, “Well, look, when the media just constantly drools over him and when he's—if I were on television as much as he was, I'd probably have 50 percent of the vote.” Right before he dropped out, Ted Cruz said that “network executives have made a decision to get behind Donald Trump. Rupert Murdoch and Roger Ailes at Fox News have turned Fox News into the Donald Trump network.” Ailes had already validated Cruz's point a few weeks prior, saying, “Did he get too much coverage? Yes.” And others in the media agreed. CNN's Brian Stelter said, “Trump is the media's addiction. When he speaks, he is given something no other candidate gets. That's wall-to-wall coverage here on cable news. He sucks up all the oxygen.” A *New York Times* headline described the challenge succinctly: “Television Networks Struggle to Provide Equal Airtime in the Era of Trump.”³⁵

There is no easy way to determine whether Trump got “too much” news coverage. One possible way to answer this is to compare 2016 to previous presidential primaries, but any comparison is complicated by differences in these elections in the number of candidates, their respective viability, and the com-

petitiveness of the race—as well as by dramatic changes in the news media over time.

Nevertheless, several such comparisons suggest that Trump received an unusually large share of news coverage. For example, one study of the 1976–2000 presidential primaries counted every mention of the candidates in broadcast news coverage in both the year before the primaries and during the primary season itself. Across those elections, only one candidate garnered more than 50 percent of the mentions—Al Gore in 2000, who received 64 percent of mentions when he was one of only two candidates in the Democratic primary and coasted to an easy victory over his opponent, Bill Bradley. Other candidates who were somewhat close to 50 percent were Bob Dole in 1996 (48%) and George W. Bush in 2000 (42%). In the 2012 Republican primary, the most-covered candidate, Romney, received only 30 percent of mentions in news coverage.³⁶

By comparison, between May 1, 2015, and April 30, 2016, Trump received 54 percent of the total cable network mentions. One thing that distinguishes Gore, Dole, and Bush from Trump is that they were dominant front-runners based on their support among party leaders. Even Romney was in a far stronger position than Trump. And these candidates were facing a smaller field too. That Trump received a level of coverage that was comparable if not greater—even though the 2016 field was larger, even though his early support in the party was weak, even though the 2016 race lacked a front-runner and was thus far more unsettled—suggests that he received an unusual amount of news coverage. In essence, Trump received the coverage a dominant front-runner usually receives, even though he was not one.

But perhaps Trump received more coverage simply because he was polling better, relative to his competitors, than did candidates in earlier primaries. However, in the last six months of 2015, Trump’s share of newspaper coverage (54%) was much larger than his share of the polls (32%)—and the discrepancy was among the largest observed in any primary since 1980.³⁷ Of course, it is expected and arguably defensible that news coverage favors candidates who are polling well over those at the back of the pack. But Trump’s share of coverage exceeded what his polling alone predicted.

How Negative Was Coverage of Trump?

Critics of the argument that news coverage helped Trump sometimes argued that the coverage was mostly negative and therefore could not have helped Trump. *Politico*’s Jack Shafer wrote, “Most of the attention directed toward Trump has been negative, speaking to his personal weaknesses, his

professional weaknesses and his policy weaknesses.” Certainly, Trump’s ability to dominate news coverage did not mean that the news coverage was always positive. There were many examples of news coverage that scrutinized not only Trump’s controversial remarks but also his personal life and business record.³⁸ But was “most of the attention directed toward Trump” negative? It is far from clear that it was.

During the campaign itself, numerous political commentators and writers raised the concern that Trump was not being scrutinized enough. Marc Ambinder said that the media “didn’t take Trump seriously” and “didn’t publicly vet him aggressively.” *Vox*’s Ezra Klein described how Trump’s rhetoric on taxes “fooled the media for a while.” *Buzzfeed*’s Ben Smith fumed about the media’s reporting Trump’s (false) claim that he did not initially support the Iraq War. National Public Radio’s David Folkenflik, who covers the news media, characterized coverage of Trump as “typically reactive and as a result generally insubstantial” and further argued that we “can’t say coverage by most outlets treated Trump w[ith] sufficient thoroughness/seriousness.”³⁹

Moreover, three sources of data suggested that coverage of Trump was not particularly negative, either overall or relative to other candidates. First, for the news articles collected by Crimson Hexagon (see figure 4.1), the firm coded the overall tone of each article—how positive or negative it was—based on the general valence of words used in the article. The articles mentioning Trump were not systematically more negative than articles mentioning other candidates. However, many articles mentioned more than one candidate, making it harder to identify how Trump was covered.⁴⁰

Second, *FiveThirtyEight*’s Nate Silver examined the most prominent articles in political news coverage between June 2015 and March 2016. Prominence was captured by the volume of links to the story from other news organizations, meaning that these were the stories that the news media itself considered most important. When those articles were about the GOP primary, Trump was the subject of the large majority (68%)—consistent with his overall dominance of news coverage. In these stories, however, the coverage was not necessarily unfavorable to Trump. The most popular topic was Trump’s poll numbers. There were twice as many stories focused on polling as on Trump’s controversial remarks. None of these leading stories was an investigative piece. These polling stories also tended to emphasize Trump’s popularity. Typically, horse race coverage of campaigns, which focuses on metrics like poll numbers, will be positive for any candidate succeeding by those metrics. Thus, although these prominent news stories certainly contained valuable reporting—including into the views of Republican leaders alarmed by Trump’s rise—a substantial number of these stories would not qualify as scrutiny and could even be considered positive for Trump.⁴¹

A third analysis of news coverage during the invisible primary reached a similar conclusion. This analysis was based on a collaboration between Harvard University’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy and the firm Media Tenor, which employed trained human coders to categorize the topic and tone of hundreds of stories from eight major news outlets. In these stories, most Trump coverage was positive or neutral in tone and for the same reason identified in Silver’s analysis: many stories were about horse race metrics. As the report’s author, Thomas Patterson, noted, “The overall media portrayal of a ‘gaining ground’ candidate is a positive one.” Even coverage of Trump’s issue positions and personal characteristics—the very things that commentators believed needed more scrutiny—was often positive in tone because of favorable quotes from Trump supporters.⁴²

None of this means that there was no important, thoughtful, or revealing reporting about Trump. Nevertheless, horse race stories were most prominent in news coverage and were arguably favorable to Trump’s rise and dominance as the front-runner. As the *Washington Post*’s Dana Milbank put it, “News organizations apply to him the same type of horse-race reporting that they do to conventional candidates: driven by polls, defining who’s up and who’s down, who won the news cycle and who lost. Trump’s moves are often described as ‘brilliant.’”⁴³

“Teflon Don”

Had Trump been scrutinized more rigorously, would it have made any difference? During the campaign, some commentators said that it would not. Trump was supposedly “unattackable,” a “Teflon” candidate or a “Teflon Don” to whom no controversy would stick.⁴⁴ However, Trump’s popularity among Republican voters *was* affected by the scrutiny that he did receive or brought on himself. Even though Trump had been a celebrity for a long time, people had not made up their minds about him. Opinions among Republican primary voters changed during the primary, and not always in Trump’s favor.

Trump’s “net favorability”—the percentage of Republicans with a favorable view of him minus the percentage with an unfavorable view—improved in the six polls after he announced his candidacy (figure 4.4). His net favorable rating increased from 0 (43% favorable, 43% unfavorable) to 27 (57% favorable, 30% unfavorable). This shows that views of Trump were not fixed in stone just because he was a celebrity. Republicans quickly warmed to him, despite the initial controversy surrounding his remarks about immigration.

But Trump’s standing did suffer after other controversies. After his remark about John McCain’s war record, his net favorable rating among Republicans dropped 16 points—despite Trump’s later claim that his poll

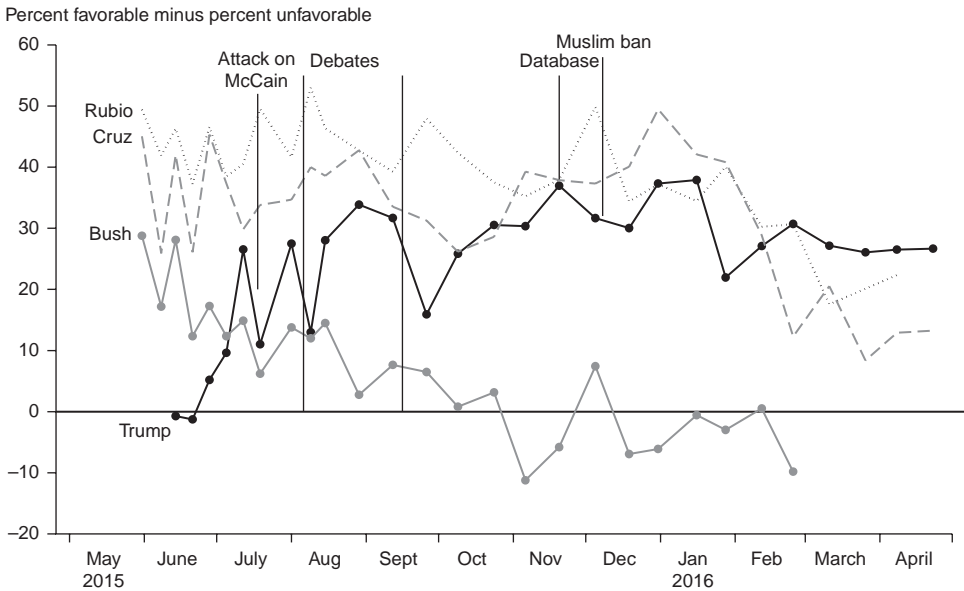


Figure 4.4.

Net favorable rating of Republican candidates among Republicans.

Net favorability is calculated as the percentage of Republicans with a favorable view of a candidate minus the percentage with an unfavorable view.

Source: YouGov polls.

numbers had increased after he made this remark. His poll numbers also dropped after the August 6 debate, where he tangled with Megyn Kelly, as well as the September 16 debate. His poll numbers dropped again later in January, right about when he boycotted a Republican primary debate, leaving his rivals to poke fun at him for the night.⁴⁵ To be sure, Trump's standing with Republicans did not suffer much from certain controversies. Trump suffered at best a small drop in popularity after his proposals for a database of Muslims and a temporary ban on Muslims traveling to the United States. This is likely because Trump's proposals were not unpopular among Republican voters, many of whom did not have a favorable view of Muslims (see chapter 5). But it was entirely possible for controversy, and the resulting scrutiny, to hurt Trump's standing among Republican voters.

Two problems remained for those hoping to stop Trump. One was that many of these controversies were only in the news briefly. Nate Silver's study found that beginning in December 2015, no particular Trump story was prominent for more than about two days. The second, and arguably more important, problem for Trump opponents was that Trump led in most polls throughout the primary season even though he was not the most popular

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Republican candidate. Trump’s net favorable rating among Republicans, while better than that of the fading Jeb Bush, was lower than either Rubio’s or Cruz’s until the beginning of the caucuses and primaries.

“Other People’s Problem”

If Trump was not “unattackable,” the strategy for his Republican opponents was obvious: attack. But for the most part, Trump’s foes did not do this. Just as many Republicans sat on their hands when it came to endorsing a candidate, many sat on their hands when it came to attacking a candidate they deemed anathema to the party’s ideals. Without these attacks, there was less fodder for news coverage and less chance that potentially damning facts about Trump would be revealed early, when they could do the most damage.⁴⁶

For one, few of Trump’s primary opponents attacked him in the preprimary debates. According to a tabulation by the *National Journal*, there were only occasional shots at Trump from most of the candidates until the tenth debate, which took place on February 25, 2016, after Trump had already won decisively in New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Nevada. The notable exception was Jeb Bush. This was perhaps ironic: Bush was often viewed as out of his depth—ignorant of what modern campaigning entails and impotent in dealing with Trump. Indeed, back in 2012, Bush was complaining of “how immature and unstatesmanlike it was that these aspiring leaders of the free world were duking it out on Twitter with sarcastic hashtags and so-called memes.” But for a long time, Bush was the only candidate routinely taking on Trump. The *National Journal* summed up the result in the headline “Donald Trump’s Long, Easy Debate Ride.”⁴⁷

The same pattern emerged in candidate advertising. Initially, almost all the attack ads—those ads criticizing a candidate or criticizing a candidate while promoting the candidate sponsoring the ad—focused on candidates other than Trump (figure 4.5). It was, again, only after Trump’s victories in South Carolina and Nevada that Trump’s opponents—mainly Rubio and Cruz and their allied super PACs—began attacking Trump via paid advertising. This was yet another way in which Trump had a long, easy ride.

The decision to delay attacks on Trump seemed to reflect both indecision and miscalculation. Throughout the fall of 2015, Republican leaders repeatedly expressed concern about Trump’s rise. The head of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, Ward Baker, called Trump a “misguided missile” who “is subject to farcical fits.” Another leader likened a Trump nomination to a “hangover and then herpes.”⁴⁸

But despite this concern, there was little coordinated effort to take Trump down or settle on an alternative. From the *Washington Post*, November 13:

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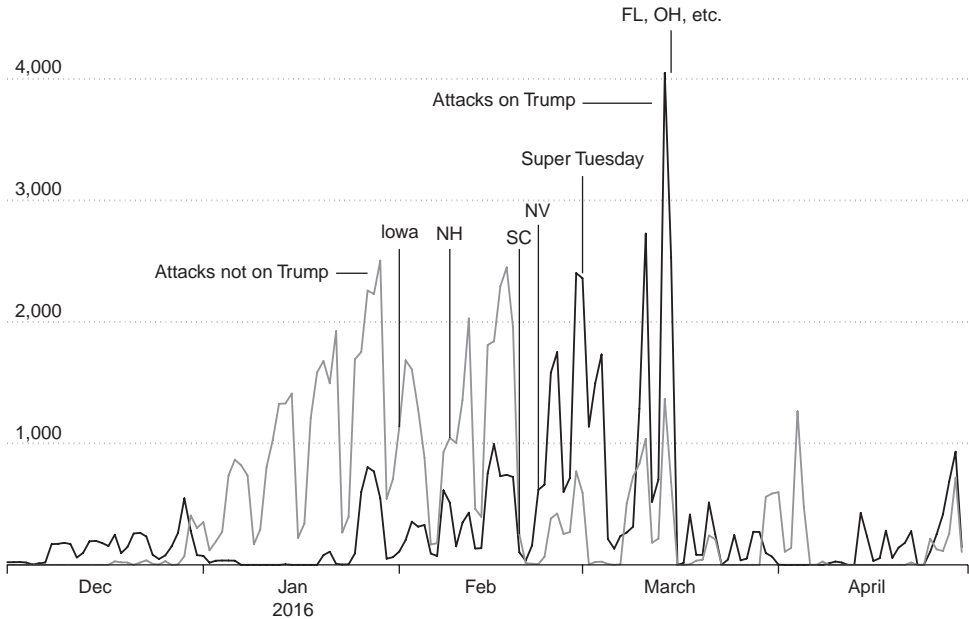


Figure 4.5.

Volume of Republican attack advertisements.

An attack ad is any ad that mentions another candidate in a critical fashion.

Source: Kantar Media/CMAG.

“The party establishment is paralyzed. Big money is still on the sidelines.” The *Washington Post*, November 25: “Plan A for GOP Donors: Wait for Trump to Fall. (There Is No Plan B.)” The *New York Times*, December 1: “But in a party that lacks a true leader or anything in the way of consensus—and with the combative Mr. Trump certain to scorch anyone who takes him on—a fierce dispute has arisen about what can be done to stop his candidacy and whether anyone should even try.” The *Washington Post*’s Chris Cillizza, December 7: “I asked one senior GOP strategist how the party establishment could somehow disarm Trump given his current status in the race and the lack of any leverage they have over the front-runner. His answer? ‘Pray.’” *Buzzfeed*, January 14: “The Anti-Trump Calvary That Never Came.” Party leaders were at such loose ends that they even considered drafting Romney as a late entry into the race.⁴⁹

So why not simply denounce Trump? Some Republican leaders feared that taking down Trump would give rise to something even worse: the nomination of “Lucifer” himself, Ted Cruz. In January 2016, when Cruz was close on Trump’s heels in Iowa polls, a spate of stories indicated the party’s unease.

A *Politico* headline: “Trump and Cruz Send Shivers Down GOP Spines.” The conservative commentator Michael Gerson: “For Republicans, the only good outcome of Trump vs. Cruz is for both to lose.” Lindsey Graham likened the choice between Cruz and Trump to “being shot or poisoned.” As one news account described it, “In Trump, most party leaders see a candidate who is unpredictable and controversial, but far less ideological than Cruz and, therefore, more likely to work with them. Several have reached out to Trump in recent weeks as their preferred candidates have stalled in the polls.”⁵⁰

All the while, the candidates were certainly attacking—but mainly each other, not Trump. Even after Cruz’s “bromance” with Trump soured, most of his ads attacked or criticized candidates other than Trump, especially Marco Rubio. Before the Iowa caucus, 58 percent of Cruz’s attack ads attacked Rubio, whereas only 24 percent attacked Trump. Rubio’s strong finish in Iowa led Cruz to ratchet up the attacks: 76 percent of Cruz’s attack ads that aired between Iowa and the New Hampshire primary targeted Rubio, as did 62 percent of his ads that aired between New Hampshire and the South Carolina primary. It was only after Trump’s win in South Carolina that Cruz pivoted and began attacking Trump in earnest.

The so-called establishment candidates made a similar calculation. They apparently believed that they were each other’s biggest threat, so they left Trump relatively unscathed. Right to Rise, Jeb Bush’s super PAC, was sitting on the largest pile of money, but its chief, Mike Murphy, called Trump a “false zombie frontrunner” and said that Trump was “other people’s problem.” Instead, Murphy said that Bush needed to “consolidate” the supporters of the establishment candidates—the “regular Republican, positive-conservative lane.” Bush’s campaign had hatched a project called Homeland Security that sought to dig up dirt on Rubio.⁵¹ On the airwaves, most of Bush’s and Right to Rise’s attack advertisements targeted Rubio. This included 62 percent of Bush’s attack ads before the Iowa caucus and 87 percent that aired between the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary—exactly when Rubio was getting additional endorsements from Republican leaders and hoping to build on his good showing in Iowa.

Rubio’s strategy was similar. His attack ads focused on Bush and to a lesser extent Cruz. Again, it was only after South Carolina that Rubio also began to take Trump on—but not without a significant backlash. At a rally on February 29, Rubio, whom Trump was calling “Little Marco,” fired back by saying that Trump had a “spray tan” and “small hands.” The latter, Rubio insinuated, meant that Trump had a small penis: “And you know what they say about guys with small hands . . .” This led to an exchange on the subject at the next Republican candidate debate, which CNN summarized with this headline: “Donald Trump Defends Size of His Penis.” Commentators were aghast at

what Bloomberg's Sasha Issenberg called Rubio's "declivitous descent into dick jokes." Only a few days later, Rubio backed down, saying that his children were "embarrassed" and that he was "not proud" of his comments. Rubio eventually apologized to Trump.⁵²

The upshot is that Trump's path to the nomination was easier because his opponents helped make it so. This is all the more remarkable because Trump's major opponents had large, well-funded campaigns, whereas the Trump campaign was essentially the opposite of the sophisticated operation that the Republican National Committee's *Growth and Opportunity Project* report had recommended: Trump raised less money, struggled to recruit experienced staff, and was slow to do basic things like purchase voter files or build a field organization.⁵³ So Bush, Rubio, and Cruz could have used their advantage in fund-raising and television advertising to try to counter Trump's advantage in free media. Between December 1, 2015, and May 4, 2016—when the last of Trump's opponents dropped out—Trump aired about 33,000 ads, whereas Bush aired 39,000, Cruz aired 49,000, and Rubio aired 59,000. But the other candidates largely did not use their advantage to take on, or take down, Trump.

Conclusion

Of course, it is impossible to know what would have happened had Trump faced more attacks or earlier attacks. It is impossible to know what would have happened if Trump had received less attention from the news. Neither may have changed the outcome—particularly given how difficult it was for Republican leaders to coordinate on an alternative to Trump. However, it would be a mistake to treat Trump as a phenomenon that bubbled up purely from the grass roots. Trump's ability to command news coverage helped legitimate him as a serious candidate, enabled him to stand out in a crowded field, and gave Republican voters the signal that they were not getting from their party's leaders. The result was a significant divide between Republican voters and Republican leaders, few of whom supported Trump.

But neither a fractured field nor dominance of news coverage was enough for Trump to win. Not every candidate can build a durable coalition among Republican voters, even when they do get news coverage. (Ask Ben Carson.) That Trump could do so is even more remarkable given how late he came to the Republican Party. Trump's success in winning over voters illustrated another identity crisis—in this case, the Republican Party's.

CHAPTER 5

Hiding in Plain Sight

Our country is in serious trouble. . . .

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. But I speak to border guards and they tell us what we're getting. And it only makes common sense. It only makes common sense. They're sending us not the right people. . . .

Save Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security without cuts. Have to do it.

—Donald Trump, announcing his candidacy on June 16, 2015

Donald Trump capitalized on a crowded Republican field and a party leadership that could not agree on any single alternative to him. He garnered massive news coverage, denying media oxygen to his competitors. He benefited when his Republican opponents underestimated his chances of winning and attacked him only late in the campaign. But which voters ultimately came to support him, and why?

Initially, Trump seemed an improbable candidate to appeal to Republican voters. He came lately to the party and to positions that were long-standing parts of the party's orthodoxy, such as opposition to abortion. On other issues, however, he rejected that orthodoxy outright and continued to do so throughout the campaign. Moreover, his personal life—his multiple marriages, his lack of any deep religious faith, his image as a Manhattan

playboy—suggested he would alienate many Republicans, especially social conservatives.

One often-cited explanation for Trump's appeal—as well as that of other “outsider” candidates—was Republican voters' “anger.” But anger is not an explanation. The question is what Republicans were angry about, and there was substantially less consensus on that question. Republicans were said to be angry about “the status quo,” “traditional politics and politicians,” Barack Obama, Republican leaders in Congress, “a concentration of wealth and power that leaves them holding the short end of the stick,” and many, many other things.¹

The reasons Republican primary voters came to support Trump were the direct consequence of what he campaigned on. A rich political science literature shows that the information voters acquire during a campaign can “activate”—or make more salient—their preexisting values, beliefs, and opinions. That is exactly how Trump won support: he activated long-standing sentiments among Republican voters—sentiments that were more prevalent among voters than among the Republican leaders that Trump often criticized. Trump simply went where many Republican voters were, despite denunciations from conservative intellectuals and party elders.

Trump's campaign message had three central themes, but two of them appeared to resonate most. The first—and least important—was dissatisfaction with politics and the economy. Although many Republicans were dissatisfied with aspects of both, such sentiments were less crucial to Trump's rise. Among Republican voters, Trump did not benefit much from any belief that ordinary people had little ability to influence politics. Trump did not appeal particularly to those who were less well off: most Trump supporters did not have low incomes or meet any conventional definition of “poor,” and the size of people's incomes was not strongly related to whether they supported Trump or another Republican candidate. To the extent that economics mattered, Trump's support was tied more to people's economic dissatisfaction: how people felt rather than their actual income. But even economic dissatisfaction was secondary to other factors.

A more important factor was the liberalism on economic issues among Republican voters. Despite the caricature of Republicans and especially Republican primary voters, many are not conservative ideologues. For decades, they have maintained views about taxes and government programs that are moderate or even liberal. Although Republican leaders have pushed for lower taxes for wealthy Americans, reductions in discretionary spending, and far-reaching reforms to entitlement programs like Medicare and Social Security, many Republican voters have not followed along. Trump's heterodox opinions—such as “Save Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security without cuts”—appealed to these voters.

The final, and arguably most important, factor was attitudes about racial, ethnic, and religious groups and racially charged issues. As these attitudes became increasingly aligned with Americans' party identification (chapter 2), more Republican voters expressed views of blacks, Muslims, and immigration that were in line with Trump's views. On immigration in particular, the Republican electorate has for decades been less supportive than Republican leaders. Many Republicans also express a shared identity with white people and think whites are being treated unfairly relative to minority groups. All of these attitudes were strongly associated with support for Trump—and in ways that they were not associated with support for his Republican opponents or the party's recent presidential nominees. It was not the voters who changed in 2016 so much as the choices they were given.

Indeed, the importance of economic insecurity was most apparent when economic sentiments were refracted through group identities. Worries about losing a job were less strongly associated with Trump support than were concerns about whites losing jobs to minorities. There was a powerful idea that “my group”—in this case, white Americans—was suffering because other groups, such as immigrants or minorities, were getting benefits that they did not deserve. This idea, which was common among Republican voters, also predated Trump. He just leveraged it to his advantage.

Ultimately, Trump built a coalition that transcended some of the party's traditional divides. This caught many observers and Republican leaders by surprise, but the roots of Trump's appeal were hiding in plain sight. He capitalized on an existing reservoir of discontent about a changing American society and culture. That discontent about what America had become helped propel him to the nomination.

Political Activation in Presidential Primaries

One of the most venerable political science findings about political campaigns is that campaigns can affect the criteria voters use to make decisions. By emphasizing certain issues or speaking directly to certain groups, candidates can make those issues and group identities more salient to voters and more predictive of their choices. Appeals to group loyalties and antagonisms have proved especially likely to change voters' opinions of candidates.²

This is all the more true in presidential primary campaigns because voters' identification with a party does not help them choose among candidates from that party. This makes their opinions of the candidates more malleable. Although some voters may come to support a candidate just because of the pure buzz of media coverage, durable momentum usually requires more than

buzz alone. As Larry Bartels puts it in his description of presidential primaries, “Through the din of horse race coverage, the hoopla of rallies, and the frantic chasing after ‘Big Mo,’ the enduring political identities of candidates and citizens gradually shape the perceptions and evaluations on which primary votes are based.” This process of “political activation” implies that when voters acquire more information about candidates during the primaries, they evaluate candidates based on their long-standing political predispositions.³

For example, Bartels shows that in 1984, Colorado senator Gary Hart’s momentum after his unexpected victory in the New Hampshire primary was concentrated among highly educated, white social progressives. These voters were more receptive to Hart’s message of “new ideas” and less enthused about Walter Mondale’s traditional New Deal policies. In the 1987 invisible primary, revelations about Hart’s extramarital affair with Donna Rice activated opposition from Democrats with traditional views about sex and family values. In 2008, Barack Obama’s momentum after winning the Iowa caucus was concentrated among people with liberal views on racial issues—the very people most likely to be attracted to an African American candidate. In 2012, Rick Santorum’s unexpected primary victories produced a surge of support from social conservatives who agreed with his positions on abortion and same-sex marriage.⁴

In other words, jumping on a candidate’s bandwagon is not purely a leap of faith: media coverage signals to voters whether the surging candidate is “their type,” and those whose beliefs align with the candidate’s then lead the surge. In 2016, the media’s extensive coverage of Trump arguably provided voters with even more information about his campaign’s message than they had had about prior candidates. Voters heard Trump in his own words, summarized by news outlets, and critiqued by commentators and even some Republicans. Each key element of Trump’s message had the potential to resonate with many Republican voters.

Identifying the origins of Trump’s appeal means confronting the perennial challenge that arises in social science research and political analysis: distinguishing cause and effect. If some belief is associated with support for Trump, that could mean one of two things: having that belief caused people to support Trump, or people who already supported Trump decided to adopt that belief (perhaps because they heard Trump say it). This latter possibility is a real risk because voters often change their positions and the importance they place on issues to match the positions and priorities of their preferred presidential candidates. When that happens, things that look like causes of a candidate’s support are really consequences or rationalizations of that support.⁵

Fortunately, a novel and unusual survey helps address this issue. In July 2016, a month after the primary's conclusion, the Views of the Electorate Research (VOTER) Survey interviewed 8,000 respondents who were originally interviewed in 2011–12.⁶ This 2011–12 survey captured respondents' views long before Trump's presidential candidacy, meaning that these views could not have been affected by his rhetoric in the 2016 campaign. In July 2016, this survey then asked Republican primary voters which of four Republican primary candidates—Trump, Ted Cruz, John Kasich, and Marco Rubio—they had supported. This survey thus identified whether Republican voters' opinions measured well before 2016 were associated with support for Trump in the primary—and which opinions appeared to matter most.

Economic and Political Dissatisfaction

One theme of Trump's campaign was encapsulated in his famous slogan, "Make America great again," and his refrain, "Our country doesn't win anymore." Trump argued that conditions in the country were terrible and far worse than they used to be. In his announcement speech, Trump said that the economy's growth rate was sluggish and that the "real" unemployment rate was 18–20 percent. Trump thought that the political system was not any better. He not only criticized Obama, as every Republican presidential candidate did, but also blamed both parties, calling Democratic and Republican leaders "incompetent." He proclaimed that he was not beholden to special interests, saying in his announcement speech, "I don't need anybody's money. I'm using my own money. I'm not using lobbyists. I'm not using donors. I don't care. I'm really rich."⁷ Although Trump reneged on his pledge to strictly self-fund his campaign, he still vowed to be the voice of the American people against a rigged system dominated by powerful special interests.

Should this message have resonated? The political science literature suggests it had potential. In a famous essay on American public opinion, the political scientist Philip Converse showed that Americans often talk about political parties and candidates in terms of how well things are going in the country when a party or candidate is in power. Converse called this factor "the nature of the times." Key groups of voters, especially those with less formal education or who pay less attention to politics, reward or punish the incumbent party based on the state of the economy.⁸

Trump's message seemed poised to resonate particularly with Republicans, who were dissatisfied with the economic, political, and cultural direction of America (chapter 2). There was also a sense among some Republicans

that the political and economic system was rigged. In a fall 2015 Pew Research Center poll, about half of Republicans said that “voting by people like me doesn’t really affect how government runs things” and “there’s not much ordinary citizens can do to influence the government in Washington.” Similarly, in a March 2016 Pew poll, about half of Republicans said that the “economic system in the US unfairly favors powerful interests.” These sentiments were not unique to Republicans: a similar fraction of Democrats expressed doubt that citizens could influence government, and a larger fraction of Democrats believed that the U.S. economic system favors the powerful. The question was whether Trump could tap into any discontent that did exist among Republicans.⁹

However, several measures of political and economic dissatisfaction were not tightly linked to support for Trump. Republican voters who agreed that “people like me don’t have any say about what the government does” or that “ordinary citizens cannot influence the government in Washington” or that the U.S. economic system “unfairly favors powerful interests” were only a little bit more likely to support Trump than those who disagreed with those statements (figure 5.1). This modest influence of political dissatisfaction extended to disenchantment with the Republican establishment as well. In several primary exit polls, Republican voters who felt betrayed by their party’s establishment were not especially likely to have voted for Trump. Interestingly, Trump himself believed that political dissatisfaction was not helping him as much as it should. He frequently complained that he was not getting credit for self-funding his campaign.¹⁰ It appears that he was right.

Similarly, Trump support was not strongly associated with family income. According to YouGov/*Economist* surveys, the median Trump supporter reported an income in the \$50,000 – \$60,000 range, right around the median income for American households overall. In the two January surveys, which captured opinion right before the primaries began, the income of the median Trump supporter was similar to that of the median supporter of some other Republican candidates, including Cruz and Rubio. On average, Trump did a bit better among those with lower incomes than those with higher incomes, but these differences waned during the primary season. By March 2016, for example, Trump support among those in the lowest income quartile—those making under \$30,000 per year—was only slightly higher than among the highest tercile, those making \$100,000 a year or more (middle right-hand panel of figure 5.1). Trump voters were not especially poor or especially likely to be poor.¹¹

Trump supporters were more distinctive in how they felt about the economy. Throughout the primary campaign, Trump’s support was higher among the 34 percent of Republicans who said that both their personal

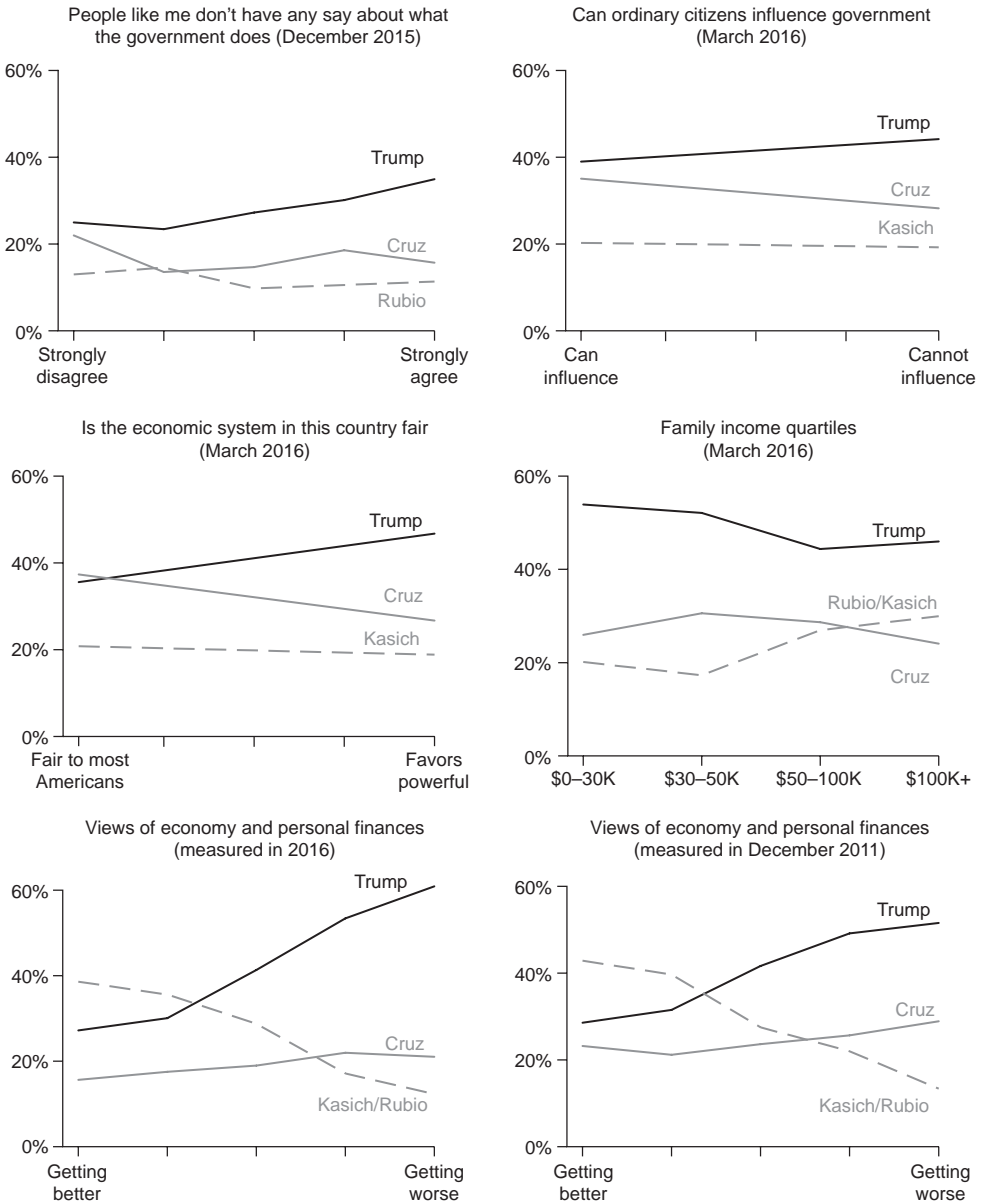


Figure 5.1.

Political and economic dissatisfaction and support for Donald Trump among Republicans. Sources: December 2015 RAND Presidential Election Panel Survey (top left); March 2016 Pew Research Center poll (top right, middle left); March 2016 YouGov/*Economist* polls (middle right, bottom left); VOTER Survey (bottom right panel).

finances and the national economy had gotten worse over the past year, compared to the 30 percent of Republicans who said that their finances and the national economy were getting better (bottom panels of figure 5.1). The gap between those two groups was persistently around 20–25 percentage points. Trump’s support from economically anxious Republicans came primarily at the expense of Marco Rubio and John Kasich.

Even Republican primary voters who said as of December 2011 that both their own personal finances and the national economy were getting worse were significantly more likely to vote for Trump in 2016, compared to those who thought that the economy was getting better.¹² Trump voters were not just parroting back Trump’s argument about how badly things were going in the country. Nevertheless, assessments of the economy and one’s personal finances did not appear to be the primary drivers of Trump’s support.

Economic Liberalism

The second of Trump’s themes put him, once again, opposite the party’s leaders. Although Trump had adopted some planks of the Republican platform, his embrace of party orthodoxy was far from complete. On foreign policy, he questioned long-standing U.S. alliances, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. He criticized the administration of George W. Bush for prosecuting the Iraq War. He criticized free trade agreements. But particularly salient in the primary campaign were Trump’s apostasies on economic issues. He rejected the party’s enduring goal of entitlement reform, promising to protect Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid benefits. He said he believed in raising taxes on the wealthy, including himself. He supported mammoth government spending on infrastructure. Of course, it was not clear whether Trump would follow through on any of this. His actual tax plan would have cut taxes for the wealthy. But his willingness even to say these things set him apart from typical Republican candidates.¹³

Trump’s heterodox politics were especially notable given the growing conservatism of Republican Party leaders in Congress and the growing strength of conservative interests within the party, such as the network affiliated with the businessmen Charles and David Koch. Unsurprisingly, then, Republican leaders and conservative thinkers were aghast. Republican senator Ben Sasse said that Trump “waged an effective war on almost every plank of the Republican Party’s platform.” The *National Review*’s January 2016 issue, which was entitled “Conservatives against Trump,” called him “a philosophically unmoored political opportunist who would trash the broad conservative

ideological consensus within the GOP in favor of a free-floating populism with strong-man overtones.”¹⁴

But although the *National Review* may have accurately described the consensus among pundits and politicians, it badly overestimated the consensus within the party’s base. Most rank-and-file Republicans are not, nor have they ever been, pure conservatives. This is why Trump’s message resonated with economically liberal Republican voters.

The idea that ordinary Americans are not orthodox ideologues is well established in political science. In the same essay in which he wrote about the “nature of the times,” Philip Converse described Americans’ “belief systems,” or how people organize (or do not organize) their political ideas. Ideologies like liberalism and conservatism provide one mode of organization: they tell voters “what goes with what.” For example, liberalism today usually means opposing the death penalty and supporting abortion rights. Conservatism means the opposite. However, after analyzing survey data from the 1950s, Converse found that the public was largely “innocent of ‘ideology.’” When asked their likes and dislikes about the political parties and presidential candidates, relatively few used ideological concepts. The majority could not define terms like *liberal* and *conservative* or could define them only in vague terms. Moreover, people’s views on various political issues often did not “go together” the way that liberalism or conservatism would predict.¹⁵

Since Converse’s essay was published in 1964, this basic finding has not really changed. In a reevaluation of Converse’s work based on 2000 data, a team of political scientists found that although a larger group used ideological concepts when describing the parties and candidates, this was still a small minority of voters (20%, compared to 12% in the 1950s). Similarly, although the political parties are better “sorted” on certain issues—with Democrats more consistently liberal and Republicans more consistently conservative—it is still common for voters to have political views out of step with their party. As political scientists Donald Kinder and Nathan Kalmoe concluded, “Ideological innocence applies nearly as well to the current state of American public opinion as it does to the public Converse analyzed.”¹⁶

Republican voters might appear to be more ideologically orthodox than the electorate as a whole. Compared to Democratic voters, they are more likely to use ideological language when describing candidates and know that the Democratic Party is to the left of the Republican Party. But Republicans can be less ideologically consistent than Democrats because many self-identified conservatives, who make up the bulk of the Republican Party, take liberal positions on economic issues like the size of government, taxing the wealthy,

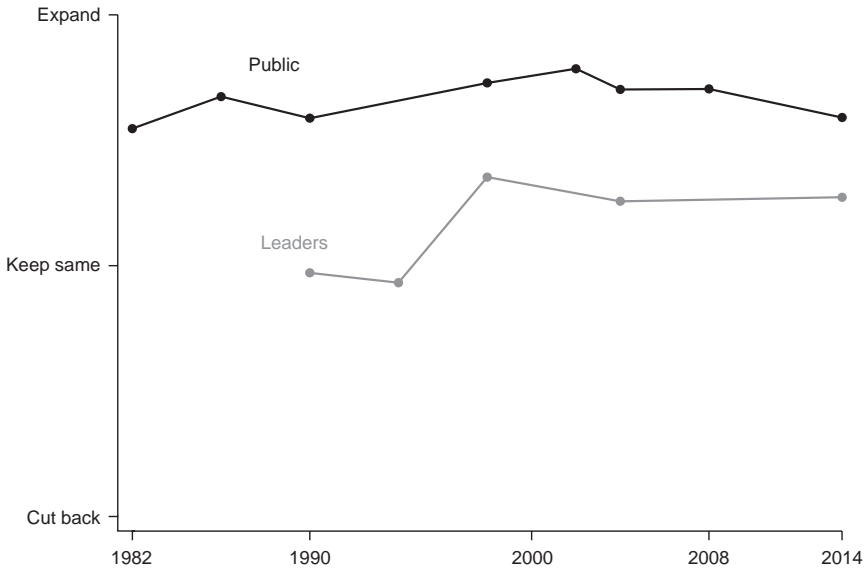


Figure 5.2.

Views of Republican voters and leaders on Social Security.

Source: Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

and the minimum wage. They are, as the political scientists Christopher Ellis and James Stimson argue, “symbolically conservative” but “operationally liberal.” As a result, numerous Republicans, even Republican primary voters, have favored maintaining or increasing spending on government programs like Social Security, health care, education, and infrastructure. This is why, as Henry Olsen and Dante Scala have written, liberals, moderates, and those who identify as only somewhat conservative are crucial Republican voting blocs, even though much commentary portrays Republican primary voters as a strongly conservative monolith.¹⁷

One illustration of Republican voters’ potential receptivity to Trump’s message concerned Social Security. Republican leaders and voters had been divided on Social Security for decades, according to parallel surveys of voters and leaders conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (figure 5.2). The leaders surveyed are not typically elected officeholders but rather congressional aides, officials in the executive branch, think tank experts, academics, business leaders, labor leaders, religious leaders, military officers, and the like. On average, Republican voters were more supportive of expanding spending on Social Security. For example, in the 2014 survey, 62 percent of Republican voters, but only 26 percent of Republican leaders, said that spending on Social Security should be expanded. Most leaders were not advocating cuts to Social Security,

to be sure, but nevertheless Trump's promise to protect Social Security was in line with long-standing views among Republican voters.

Unsurprisingly, then, once Trump got in the race, he attracted considerable support among more liberal Republicans. For example, Trump did better among Republicans who believed Social Security and Medicare were very important in this 2011 interview, even though those attitudes were measured five years earlier (top left-hand panel of figure 5.3). Trump also did better among Republicans who, as of late 2011, supported a tax increase on Americans making more than \$200,000 per year (top right-hand panel). This was approximately 34 percent of Republicans—far from a majority but illustrative of the ideological diversity in the party.

Other surveys showed an even more powerful correlation between economic liberalism and support for Trump. In December 2015, respondents to the RAND Presidential Election Panel Survey (PEPS) were asked whether the government should pay “necessary medical costs for every American citizen,” whether there should be a tax increase on individuals making more than \$200,000 per year, whether the federal minimum wage should be increased, and how respondents felt toward “big business” and “labor unions.” Among likely Republican primary voters, economic liberals were not a tiny minority: 30 percent favored the government's paying medical costs, 47 percent supported raising the minimum wage, 51 percent support increasing taxes on the wealthy, and 25 percent had more favorable views of unions than of big business. And it was these liberals who tended to support Trump most strongly (lower left-hand panel of figure 5.3). By contrast, Ted Cruz, who may have been the most conservative candidate to ever run for the Republican nomination, performed best among economic conservatives.¹⁸ Cruz outperformed Trump by about 15 percentage points among the most economically conservative Republicans but lost to Trump by over 30 points among more liberal Republicans.

Other surveys showed a similar pattern. For example, in YouGov/*Economist* surveys conducted throughout the primary campaign, Trump's support was stronger among those who prioritized Social Security and Medicare, whereas Cruz's support was stronger among those who described themselves as “very conservative.” By the end of the primaries, Cruz was winning a majority of these voters. But only 25 percent of Republicans described themselves as very conservative in the first place, so Cruz needed to expand his support beyond this group. He could not, perhaps because there are not enough committed ideologues in the party in the first place.

In sum, there have always been voters, and especially Republican voters, whose views could make them susceptible to a heterodox primary candidate like Trump. Such candidates usually struggle to succeed, however, because party elites and activists, who tend to be stronger ideologues, will not

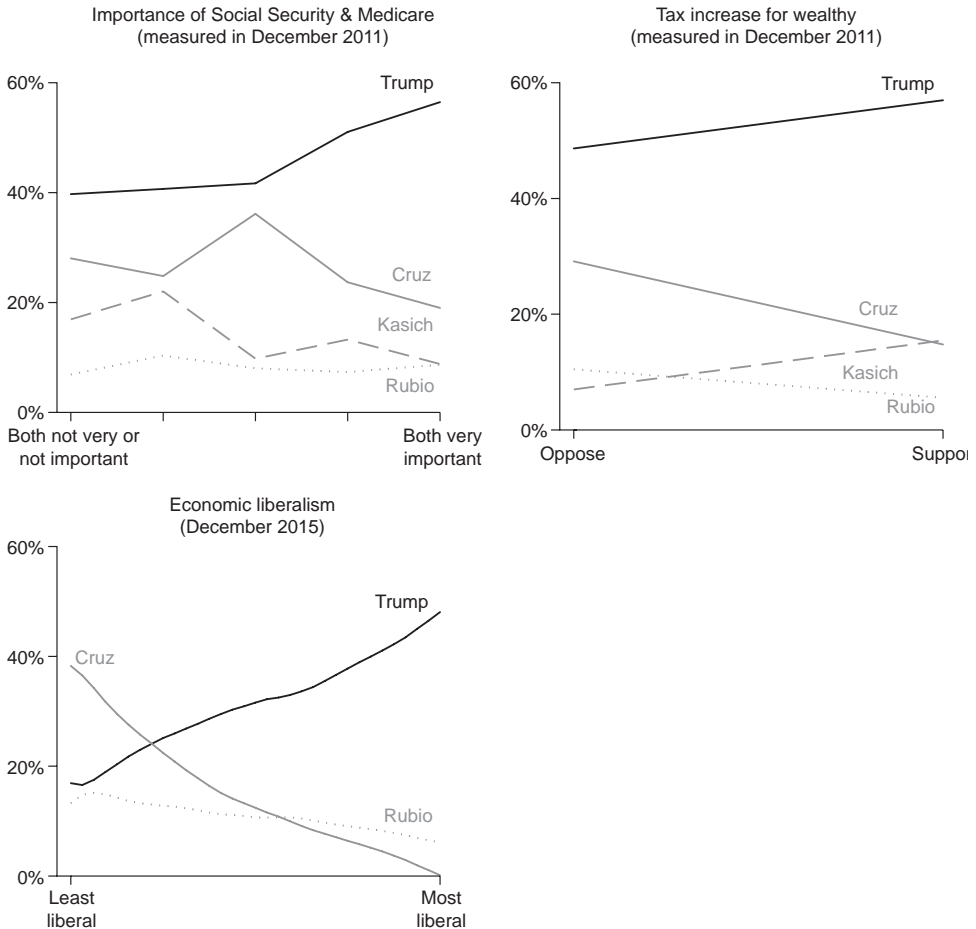


Figure 5.3.

Economic liberalism and support for Republican primary candidates.

Sources: VOTER Survey (top panels); December 2015 Presidential Election Panel Survey (bottom panel).

support them. But when Republican elites failed to derail Trump's candidacy early on, Republicans who had not adopted every plank of the party platform had their own candidate.

Race, Immigration, and Islam

A third theme of Trump's campaign was even more widely discussed and controversial: issues intimately tied to race, ethnicity, and religion—and especially to blacks, immigrants from Latin America, and Muslims. These

issues were not new to American politics, but Trump discussed them more frequently and in a more polarizing fashion than other Republican candidates. As a result, voters' own views on these issues became strongly related to whether they supported Trump or one of his opponents in the primary.

Trump's rhetoric often carried a racial charge that was implicitly or explicitly connected to stereotypes of African Americans. This was true when he talked about Obama. Trump not only accused Obama of being born outside the United States but also made thinly veiled accusations that the president got into Ivy League schools because of affirmative action, saying, "How does a bad student go to Columbia and then to Harvard?" and, "I have friends who have smart sons with great marks, great boards, great everything and they can't get into Harvard." Trump also took strong positions on racially inflected issues, particularly criminal justice. Like many Republicans, Trump sided with police officers over the Black Lives Matter movement, which protested police treatment of African Americans. Trump even called for a Black Lives Matter protester to be "roughed up" at one of his primary rallies. Trump declared himself "the law and order candidate" and called for ramping up the police tactic of "stop and frisk" even though a federal court had deemed the tactic racially discriminatory. Trump also retweeted wildly inaccurate statistics put forth by a white nationalist claiming that African Americans killed 81 percent of white homicide victims, when the actual number is just 15 percent. Views of Obama, affirmative action, and criminal justice policy are all strongly tied to feelings toward African Americans.¹⁹

Even some of Trump's positions and rhetoric that were ostensibly not about race may have activated racial attitudes, including his support for government programs like Social Security and Medicare. Social welfare and insurance programs have long been tied to racial attitudes, with support for welfare programs weaker among whites with less favorable views of African Americans. But for the programs that Trump supported, the opposite is true: Americans with less favorable views of African Americans have been more supportive of federal spending on Social Security and Medicare. As the political scientist Nicholas Winter has argued, "Social Security has been linked symbolically with the in-group and with hard work and legitimately earned rewards—values and attributes associated symbolically with whiteness in most (white) Americans' racial schemas." Donald Trump's discussion of protecting Social Security and Medicare for hardworking and deserving Americans arguably evoked racial imagery.²⁰

Trump's views on racial issues like affirmative action and crime did not necessarily put him at odds with other Republicans. But his views on immigration did. Immigration was one of Trump's signature issues from the moment he announced his candidacy and condemned Mexican immigrants

as criminals and rapists while promising to “build a great, great wall on our southern border.” He also proposed a “deportation force” that would expel millions of unauthorized immigrants from the country, challenged the constitutionally mandated citizenship granted to anyone born in the United States, and advocated a ban on Muslim immigration to the United States.²¹ This was all quite a departure from Trump’s complaint after the 2012 election, when he said, “Republicans didn’t have anything going for them with respect to Latinos and with respect to Asians. The Democrats didn’t have a policy for dealing with illegal immigrants, but what they did have going for them is they weren’t mean-spirited about it. They didn’t know what the policy was, but what they were is they were kind.”²²

Trump’s views were also a departure from those of his Republican opponents, especially Jeb Bush, Kasich, and Rubio. Both Bush and Kasich attacked Trump on immigration in the primary debates. For example, in the November 2015 debate, where Trump again advocated for mass deportation of undocumented immigrants, Kasich said, “Think about the families; think about the children. Come on, folks, we know you can’t pick them up and ship them across the border. It’s a silly argument. It’s not an adult argument.” Bush argued that Trump was hurting the Republican Party among Latinos: “They’re doing high-fives in the Clinton campaign right now when they hear this.”²³

Rubio was the son of Cuban immigrants, and his parents had impressed on him the importance of inclusion. Rubio’s statement at a press conference announcing the Senate’s 2013 immigration reform plan echoed these sentiments: “I live surrounded by immigrants. My neighbors are immigrants. My family is immigrants. I married into a family of immigrants. I see immigration every single day.” He went on to say, “We are dealing with eleven million human beings who are here undocumented—the vast and enormous majority of whom have come here in pursuit of what all of us would recognize as the American dream.” Rubio’s bruising experience in the immigration reform fight did lead him to advocate stricter immigration policies in the presidential race. He emphasized securing the border and opposed Obama’s executive order granting the American-born children of undocumented immigrants a deferral from deportation. Rubio even accused Ted Cruz—who had long inveighed against “amnesty” for undocumented immigrants—of being soft on immigration.²⁴ But none of the other candidates, even critics of immigration reform like Cruz, matched Trump. Trump’s policies were more draconian and his rhetoric harsher.

Trump’s view placed him out of step with many Republican leaders, especially within the business community, which valued immigration for its economic benefits. However, Trump’s view was again arguably closer to that

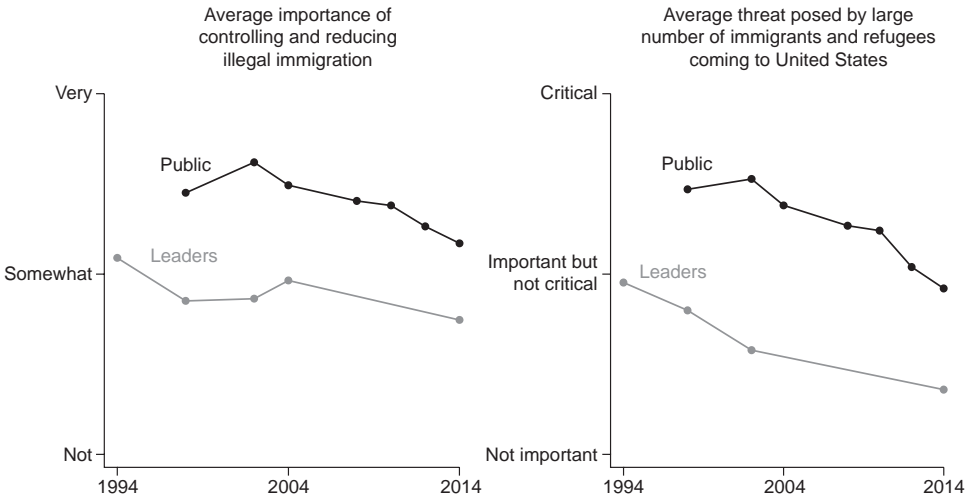


Figure 5.4.
Views of Republican voters and leaders on immigration.
Source: Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

of many Republican voters. In the Chicago Council on Global Affairs surveys, Republican voters expressed much more concern about immigration than did Republican leaders (figure 5.4). Republican voters assigned more importance to “reducing illegal immigration” and were more likely to say that “immigrants and refugees coming to the U.S.” posed a “critical threat.” Those concerns became less prominent in later surveys, but even in 2014, 86 percent of Republican voters said that controlling and reducing immigration was somewhat or very important (versus 60% of Republican leaders) and 73 percent said that immigrants and refugees posed an important or critical threat (versus 22% of Republican leaders).

Most Republican voters also took positions on immigration policy that dovetailed with Trump’s. Even before the primary campaign, majorities of Republicans supported building a fence along the Mexican border, said that “immigrants are a burden because they take jobs, housing and health care,” and wanted tougher restrictions on immigration in general. Thus, it was not surprising that 68 percent of Republican primary voters believed that Trump’s statement about Mexican immigrants being rapists who bring drugs and crime into the country was “basically right.”²⁵

At times, other polls suggested that most Americans, including most Republicans, would support a more lenient immigration policy, such as granting undocumented immigrants permanent residency or even citizenship. But there was less enthusiasm for how this would work in practice. For

example, one survey of Californians found that 70 percent supported a path to citizenship. At the same time, however, 42 percent supported having undocumented immigrants return to their home countries first, and 51 percent said that undocumented immigrants must meet the typical criteria that legal immigrants must meet, such as having family in the United States, skills needed by U.S. employers, or a credible asylum claim. Immigration reform legislation typically required none of these, which raised concerns that it would give undocumented immigrants an unfair “inside track.” The conclusion of the scholars who conducted this poll is striking: “The majority’s negativity toward the details of any politically-viable reform package weakens the incentive for politicians to press forward, and the large and intransigent minority of the public overall (*almost half of the Republican electorate*) that categorically rejects any broad-based legalization program *stands as a potential group lurking and ready to mobilize against elected officials who back legalization.*”²⁶ Indeed, this “potential group” had already been mobilized before the 2016 campaign. In a 2012 study of the Tea Party, the political scientists Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson quoted one Tea Party supporter who said that she wanted to “stand on the border with a gun.” Another said, “I feel like my country is being stolen by people who have come here illegally.” Donald Trump was well aware of such sentiments. In preparation for his presidential bid, he instructed his aides to listen to thousands of hours of conservative talk radio. They reported back to Trump that “the GOP base was frothing over a handful of issues,” one of which was immigration.²⁷

Trump’s emphasis on immigration focused not only on undocumented immigrants from Latin American countries but also on Muslim immigrants. In August 2015, he made headlines for refusing to admonish a supporter who told him at a rally, “We have a problem in this country. It’s called Muslims.” In September, he suggested that large numbers of Syrian refugees were terrorists. He also falsely claimed that thousands of Muslims in New Jersey cheered the 9/11 attacks. Later that fall came his proposals for a national database to register Muslims, enhanced surveillance of mosques in the United States, and a ban on Muslims entering the United States.²⁸

Trump’s proposals were immediately rebuked by politicians from across the political spectrum, including many prominent Republicans. Jeb Bush said, “You talk about closing mosques, you talk about registering people—that’s just wrong.” Paul Ryan said that the Muslim ban violated the Constitution and was “not who we are as a party.” Mitt Romney, Dick Cheney, and Reince Priebus also opposed Trump’s proposal. Trump’s future running mate, Mike Pence, tweeted, “Calls to ban Muslims from entering the U.S. are offensive and unconstitutional.”²⁹

But here again, Trump was arguably in line with public opinion. On average, Americans have less favorable views of Muslims, relative to most other social groups, and view Muslims especially unfavorably on dimensions like their proclivity for violence. Attitudes toward Muslims are less favorable among Republicans than among Democrats (see chapter 2). In a June 2014 Pew Research Center poll, two-thirds of Republicans thought that Islam was more likely than other religions to encourage violence, compared to 40 percent of Democrats. And even before Trump ran, negative views of Muslims already had political consequences: they were associated with support for the war on terror and negative views of Obama, especially the belief that he was not born in the United States.³⁰

Thus, it was not surprising that, despite bipartisan condemnation of Trump's proposed Muslim ban, large majorities of Republican primary voters favored it. For example, a *Washington Post*/ABC News poll found that 59 percent of Republicans supported the ban, compared to only 15 percent of Democrats. In Republican primary exit polls, support for the ban ranged from a low of 63 percent in Michigan and Virginia to a high of 78 percent in Alabama. There appeared to be a clear constituency for Trump's message about the dangers that Muslims posed to the United States.³¹

Given Trump's rhetoric about blacks, immigrants, and Muslims, it is no surprise that views of those groups were strongly correlated with supporting him (figure 5.5). Support for Trump was associated with how much people attributed racial inequality to the legacy of discrimination as opposed to a lack of effort by African Americans—even when those views were measured in 2011 (upper left panel of figure 5.5). The 85 percent of Republicans who tended to emphasize blacks' work ethic were more than 50 points more likely to support Donald Trump in the primaries than were those who emphasized discrimination. Support for Trump was also correlated with 2011 evaluations of African Americans on a feeling thermometer (upper right panel).³²

That racial attitudes measured five years before the 2016 campaign would be related to Trump support is not unexpected. Racial attitudes tend to be stable throughout adulthood, and campaign appeals to racial anxieties have often succeeded in activating support from some whites.³³ But these findings suggest which specific racial attitudes were especially important. It was less about a general dislike of blacks per se. Relatively few Republicans rated blacks unfavorably on the feeling thermometer—15 percent placed blacks at 40 or below on the 0–100 scale—and the correlation between these ratings and Trump support was modest. Trump's support had more to do with the racialized perceptions of deservingness captured in people's explanations of racial inequality. Of course, many argue that such explanations are

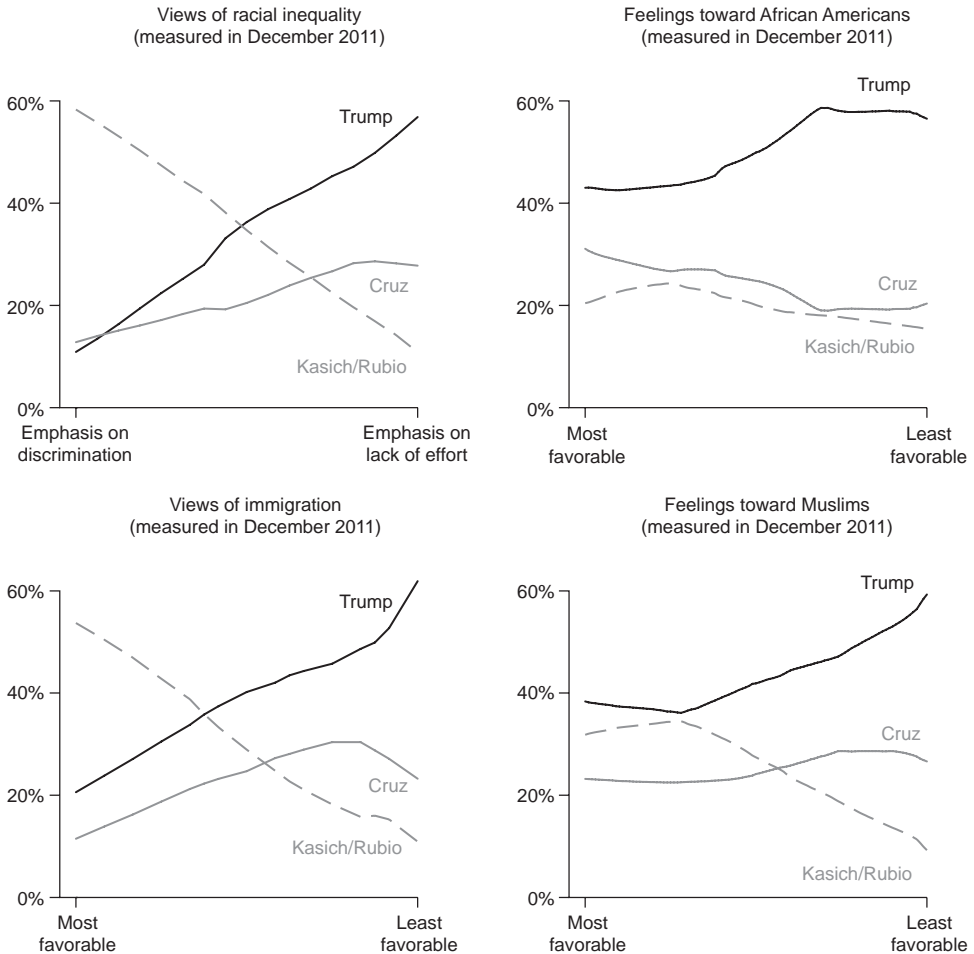


Figure 5.5.

Attitudes toward immigration, Muslims, and African Americans and support for Republican primary candidates.

The lines have been smoothed using lowess.

Source: VOTER Survey.

themselves rooted in racial prejudice, particularly views that African Americans are culturally inferior.³⁴ But that remains a hotly debated topic in the social science literature. Regardless, the measure captures the widespread notion that African Americans no longer face much discrimination and are receiving unearned special favors. Indeed, whites who hold these beliefs often cite “reverse discrimination” as being a more serious problem.³⁵

Trump support was also strongly associated with views of immigration. Respondents to the VOTER Survey were asked in 2011 whether there should be a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, whether undocumented immigrants were mostly a benefit to or a drain on society, and whether it should be easier or harder to immigrate to the United States. Trump did much better among voters who were unfavorable to immigration, based on a scale combining these questions, while Rubio and Kasich did worse.³⁶ Trump's advantage over Cruz was also clear. Both candidates gained vote share at Rubio's and Kasich's expense among voters with moderate or conservative-leaning positions on immigration. But among those voters with the most conservative views according to this measure, Trump did especially well, and at Cruz's expense. Given that attitudes toward immigrants depend more on cultural than economic factors, the connection between concerns about immigration and support for Trump was likely undergirded by the sense that immigrants threaten the nation's identity and heritage.³⁷

Other perceptions of threat—this time involving Muslims—were also associated with Trump support. Respondents to the VOTER Survey were asked in December 2011 to evaluate Muslims on a feeling thermometer that captured their overall views of Muslims. Trump performed significantly better with Republican voters who rated Muslims relatively unfavorably in 2011 than he did with Republican voters who rated Muslims relatively favorably (bottom right panel of figure 5.5). Views of Muslims were not strongly related to support for Cruz or Rubio, but they were related to support for Kasich, just in the opposite direction. Kasich condemned both Trump and Cruz for their rhetoric about Muslims.³⁸ The problem for Kasich was that in December 2011, most Republicans (64%) rated Muslims on the “cold” side of the feeling thermometer; the average rating for Muslims among Republicans was 37 (compared to 81 for Christians and 74 for Jews). The prevalence of negative views of Muslims helped sustain Trump's support among Republican voters despite harsh scrutiny of his position toward Muslims, including from prominent Republican leaders.

White Identity

Trump's primary campaign also became a vehicle for a different kind of identity politics—one oriented around some white Americans' feelings of marginalization in an increasingly diverse America. Affection for Trump emerged quickly among avowed white nationalists, including a community, mostly online, known as the alt-right. Trump was endorsed by the neo-Nazi website

Daily Stormer and by former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke. A white nationalist super PAC made robocalls on behalf of Trump in Iowa and New Hampshire that said, “We don’t need Muslims. We need smart, educated, white people.” Richard Spencer, the president of the National Policy Institute, which is “dedicated to the heritage, identity, and future of European people in the United States and around the world,” described “an unconscious vision that white people have—that their grandchildren might be a hated minority in their own country” and said that Trump “is the one person who can tap into it.” Even some voters, few of whom were neo-Nazis, expressed concern about the plight of whites. One New York woman told a reporter, “Everyone’s sticking together in their groups, so white people have to, too.”³⁹

Trump faced consistent criticism for fomenting these sentiments, for example by retweeting supportive tweets from white supremacists, or failing to condemn his white nationalist supporters swiftly and strongly enough. In an essay entitled “Are Republicans for Freedom or White Identity Politics?,” the conservative writer Ben Domenech called Trump a “danger” to the party. After Trump said that he “didn’t know anything about” David Duke, a Rubio spokesman said, “If you need to do research on the K.K.K. before you can repudiate them, you are not ready or fit to be president.” Mitt Romney tweeted, “A disqualifying & disgusting response by @realDonaldTrump to the KKK. His coddling of repugnant bigotry is not in the character of America.” But some conservatives attacked the critics, with media personality Tucker Carlson saying that “Obama could have written” Romney’s tweet.⁴⁰

It is unusual for white identity to be politically potent. Whites’ solidarity with fellow whites has been less prevalent and less powerful than solidarity among minority groups, such as Latinos and especially African Americans. This is because in-group identity arises from isolation, deprivation, and discrimination, and whites have long been less deprived and discriminated against than minority racial groups.⁴¹

But all of this was changing, even before Trump’s candidacy. In her book *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild details her extensive conversations with whites in Louisiana bayou country and the resentment they felt over how the beneficiaries of affirmative action, immigrants, and refugees were “stealing their place in line,” cutting ahead “at the expense of white men and their wives.” These sentiments were visible in surveys as well. In American National Election Studies (ANES) surveys conducted in December 2011 and February 2012, 38 percent of Republicans thought that there was at least a moderate amount of discrimination against whites. That figure jumped up to 47 percent in the ANES study in January 2016. Similarly, in an October 2015 Public Religion Research Institute poll, nearly two-thirds of Republicans

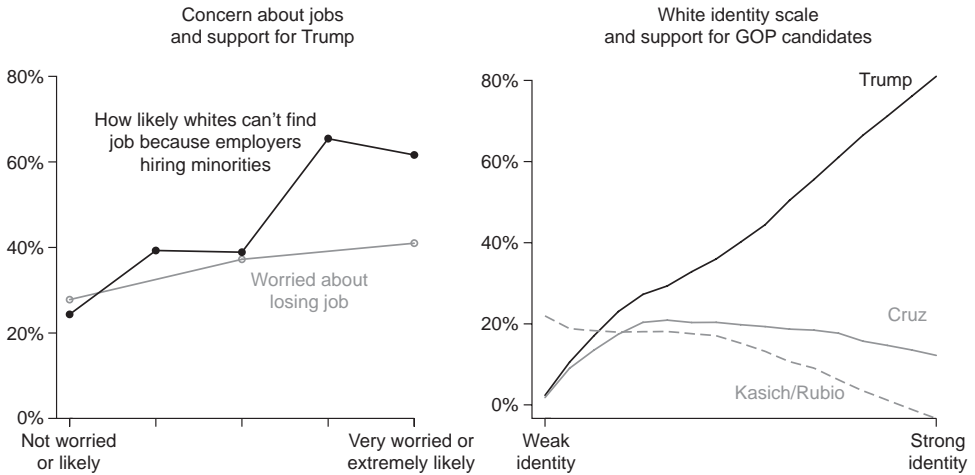


Figure 5.6.

White identity and support for Donald Trump in the primary.

Sources: January YouGov/*Economist* surveys for worried about job and 2016 ANES Pilot Study for beliefs about whites' jobs (left panel); 2016 ANES Pilot Study (right panel, with line smoothed using lowess).

thought that “discrimination against whites has become as big of a problem as discrimination against blacks and other minorities.” In a 2016 survey, most Republicans agreed with this statement: “People like me are asked to make too many sacrifices that benefit people of another race.” Research by political scientist Ashley Jardina and others has shown that a sense of discrimination or competition with minority groups increases whites’ solidarity with other whites and opposition to minority groups.⁴²

Trump’s campaign appealed directly to this very sense of economic and cultural threat. Trump support was strongly correlated with whether Republicans thought that whites are unable to find a job because employers are hiring minorities. By contrast, Trump support was only weakly correlated with whether respondents were worried about losing their own jobs (left panel of figure 5.6). Consistent with a long line of research showing that group interests are more potent politically than self-interest, economic anxiety was channeled more through white identity politics than it was through Trump supporters’ concern for their own personal well-being.⁴³

The January 2016 ANES Pilot Study asked four questions that captured white identity: the importance of white identity, how much whites are being discriminated against, the likelihood that whites are losing jobs to nonwhites, and the importance of whites working together to change laws unfair to whites. A scale combining these questions was also strongly related to

Republicans' support for Donald Trump (right panel of figure 5.6). Moreover, this measure of white identity was not related to evaluations of any other political figure in this survey, including Barack Obama, after accounting for attitudes about African Americans, Muslims, and Latinos. Trump was distinctive in how he tapped into white grievances.

Of course, Trump's appeal to white identity in 2016 was not unprecedented. Both Pat Buchanan in 1996 and George Wallace in 1968 campaigned on threats to white Americans and thereby made white identity an important part of their electoral support.⁴⁴ But neither Buchanan nor Wallace won a major-party nomination, much less the presidency. Trump's success may mean that appeals to white identity, including the suggestion that white dominance is increasingly threatened by nonwhites, is a rising force in American politics.

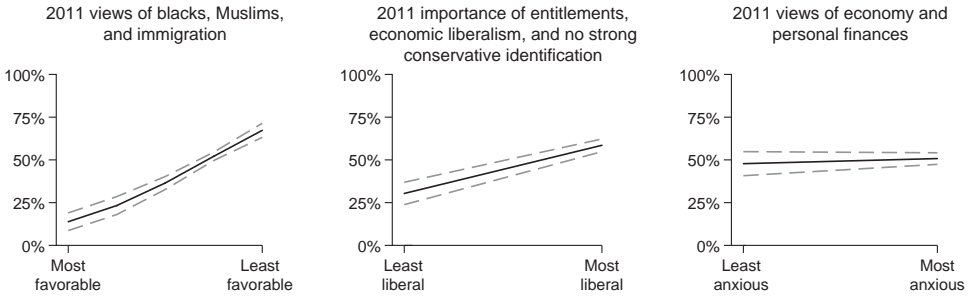
The Preeminence of Identity over Economics

Compared to the supporters of other Republican candidates, Trump supporters were more dissatisfied with the economy, more liberal on economic issues, less supportive of immigration, less favorable toward Muslims, more inclined to attribute racial inequality to a lack of effort by African Americans, and more strongly identified with whites—even when some of these things were measured more than four years before Trump's candidacy. The major debate during the campaign, however, was which factor was preeminent—and especially whether “economic anxiety” or “racial anxiety” mattered more.

Disentangling these various factors is not straightforward, of course. Nevertheless, factors tied to race, ethnicity, and religion appeared more strongly related to Trump support in the primary than was voters' economic insecurity. This pattern emerged in three different surveys—the VOTER Survey, the December 2015 PEPS, and the January 2016 ANES Pilot Study. The results from the VOTER Survey are particularly important because each of these factors was measured well before Trump's candidacy. (See this chapter's appendix for further details.)

A concise visualization of findings from the VOTER Survey and the ANES Pilot Study is depicted in figure 5.7. After accounting for various factors simultaneously, the relationship of Trump support to “racial anxiety” is clear. In the VOTER Survey, the combined relationship of Trump support to views of immigration, Muslims, and racial inequality was large: people with the least favorable views—that is, most likely to oppose immigration, dislike Muslims, and attribute racial inequality to blacks' lack of effort—were 53 points more likely to support Trump than those with the most favorable views (all else held

2016 VOTER Survey: Combined relationship between chance of supporting Trump and . . .



2016 ANES Pilot Study: Combined relationship between chance of supporting Trump and . . .

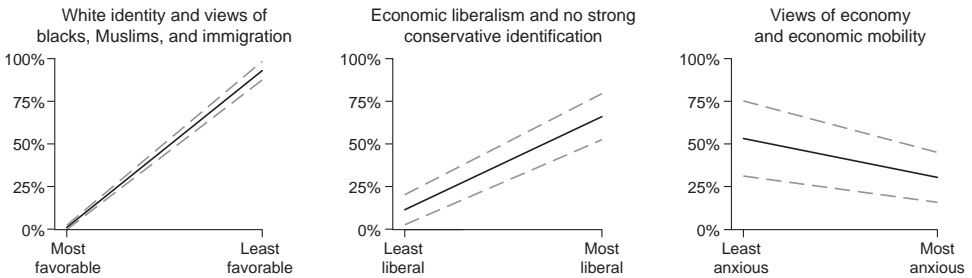


Figure 5.7.

The combined relationship between Trump support and attitudes related to race, ethnicity, religion, liberalism, and economic anxiety.

This figure captures the relationship between support for Trump and the combination of various attitudes, holding other factors at their means. The dotted lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Sources: VOTER Survey; 2016 ANES Pilot Study.

equal). In the ANES survey, accounting for white identity lessened the relationship between support for Trump and attitudes toward immigration and Muslims, suggesting again that a politicized white identity was a potent electoral force. The combination of a more politicized white identity and views of immigration, Muslims, and African Americans was very strongly related to support for Trump—implying a maximum shift of 93 points, largely because of the apparent power of white identity (see figure 5.6).

The relationship of liberalism to Trump support also stands out after accounting for other factors. In the VOTER Survey, the combined relationship of prioritizing Social Security and Medicare, liberal views on economic issues (supporting increased taxes on the wealthy and the government’s role in providing health care and regulating business), and identifying as anything other than “strongly conservative” was notable—a maximum 28-point shift

in Trump support. In the ANES survey, the same relationship emerges: identifying as less than a “strong” conservative and supporting a hike in the minimum wage and increasing government spending on health care and child care were collectively associated with a maximum 55-point shift in Trump support.

By contrast, there was a much weaker relationship between support for Trump and plausible measures of “economic anxiety.” In the VOTER Survey, the combination of perceptions of the national economy and one’s personal finances was not related to Trump support.⁴⁵ In the ANES survey, a mostly different measure of economic anxiety was also weakly related to support for Trump. The ANES included questions not only about whether the economy was getting better but also about economic mobility: “How much opportunity is there in America today for the average person to get ahead?”; whether it is harder “for you to move up the income ladder”; and “whether people’s ability to improve their financial well-being” is better than, worse than, or the same as it was twenty years ago. If anything, the more that anxious Republicans were based on a composite scale of these items, the *less* likely they were to support Trump in the primary. In short, although Americans’ economic disaffection was a recurring theme of political analysis, it appeared less important than other factors in explaining Trump’s rise to the Republican nomination.⁴⁶

Other factors common to election-year commentary appeared less important as well. The importance attached to the issue of terrorism as of late 2011 was not associated with Trump support, even though Trump spoke frequently about the need to fight ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) and “radical Islamic terrorism.” Similarly, despite Trump’s frequent criticisms of free trade agreements, opposition to increasing trade or to free trade agreements was weakly associated with supporting him. There was also little apparent relationship between support for Trump and distrust of government.⁴⁷ Finally, despite much election-year discussion of the concept of “authoritarianism”—valuing traits like obedience and manners over self-reliance and curiosity—it too was not consistently associated with support for Trump. Some research even found that it was more associated with support for Ted Cruz in the primaries. To be sure, authoritarian worldviews have become increasingly important in American politics. But Trump’s playboy lifestyle and thin record of social conservatism may have weakened any connection between authoritarianism and support for him, especially given the competition from a strong religious conservative such as Cruz.⁴⁸

Of course, these surveys did not measure every conceivable factor that undergirded Trump’s appeal. There are undoubtedly other factors that were important, at least for some voters. Nevertheless, these surveys tell a consis-

tent story: support for Trump was tied most strongly to white grievances; views of immigration, Muslims, and blacks; and liberal views about economic issues. These factors, more than economic anxiety, helped explain Trump's surprising path to the Republican presidential nomination.

The importance of attitudes related to race, ethnicity, and religion was even more striking because it was so unusual. Typically, the divides in party primaries are about ideology, with moderates squaring off against ideologues. Certainly that was true in recent Republican primaries. Sometimes more conservative Republicans prevailed, as they did in nominating Ronald Reagan over George H. W. Bush in 1980 or George W. Bush over John McCain in 2000. More often, the Republican nominee was more moderate than others in the field. Gerald Ford, Bob Dole, and Mitt Romney are examples.

Thus, the 2016 Republican divide over issues like immigration was less familiar. Typically, it has been the Democrats who have been more divided over race because the Democratic coalition has included African Americans, liberal whites, and conservative whites. Voters in the 1984, 1988, 2008, and 2016 Democratic primaries were all sharply divided by race. The Republican Party, by contrast, has been more unified around a "color-blind policy alliance" that calls for a diminished role of race in public policies. Few Republican candidates for president have attempted to distinguish themselves from their Republican rivals on issues connected to race and ethnicity—until Trump did exactly that.⁴⁹

Trump was also unusual in how he talked about identity. Candidates have traditionally used implicit racial and ethnic appeals to win over sympathetic voters without appearing overtly prejudiced. These appeals have often activated support among voters with less favorable views of racial minorities. But Trump's appeals were explicit. He went where most Republican presidential candidates have not gone and became the first Republican in modern times to win the party's presidential nomination based in part on these attitudes.⁵⁰

This is readily visible when comparing the 2008, 2012, and 2016 Republican primaries. Support for John McCain in 2008 or Mitt Romney in 2012 was at best weakly related to support for a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, views of racial inequality, or feelings toward Muslims (figure 5.8). But Trump was more popular than McCain or Romney among Republicans who opposed a path to citizenship, viewed racial inequality primarily in terms of blacks' lack of effort, and had less favorable attitudes toward Muslims.⁵¹

The perception of discrimination against whites was also more strongly associated with support for Trump than it was for Mitt Romney in 2012 (figure 5.8). Support for Romney was 8 points lower among Republicans who said that there was a great deal of discrimination against whites, compared to those who said there was none. Trump, however, performed about 22 percentage

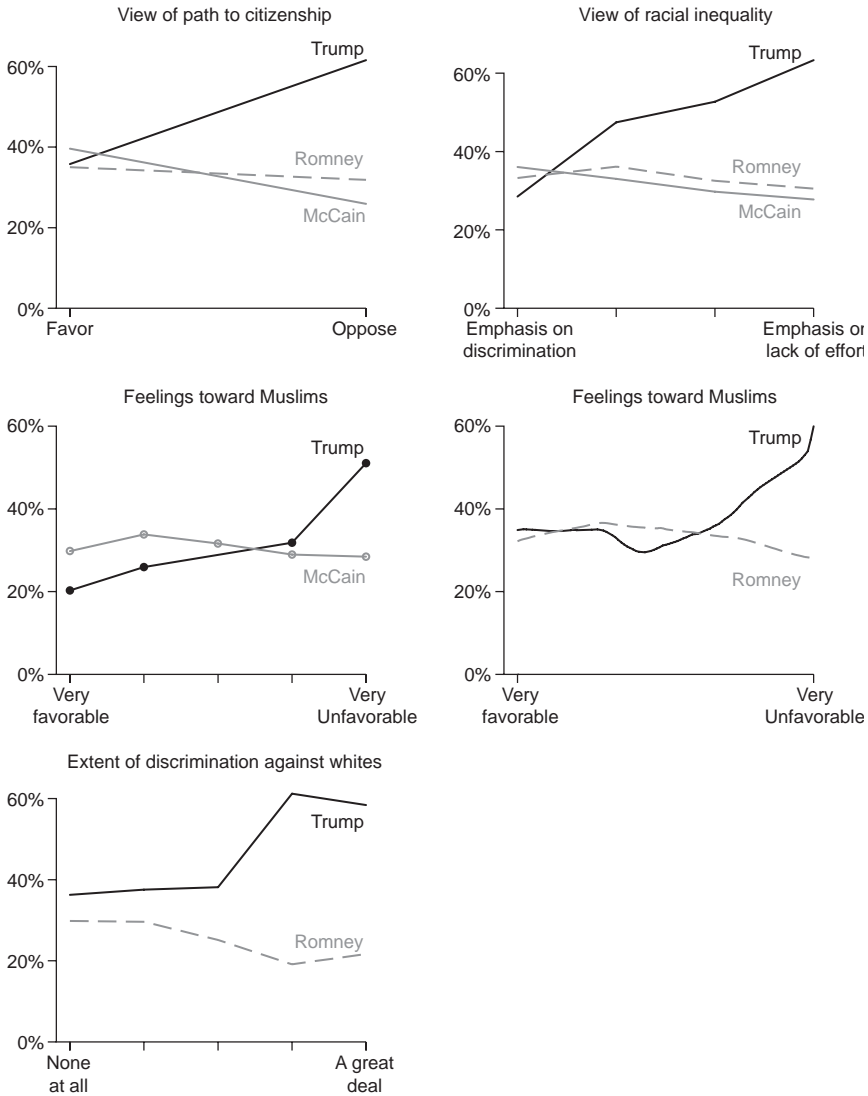


Figure 5.8.

White identity and views of immigration, African Americans, and Muslims and support for the Republican presidential nominees in 2008, 2012, and 2016.

The lines in the middle right-hand graph are smoothed using lowess (bandwidth = 0.8).

Sources: 2008 and 2012 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project, 2016 YouGov/*Economist* surveys (top panels); PEPS and 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (middle left); ANES Pilot Study and 2012 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (middle right); 2016 ANES Pilot Study and 2011–12 Evaluations of Government and Society Study (lower left).

points *better* among Republicans who said that there was a great deal of discrimination against whites.

To be sure, Trump was not the first presidential primary candidate whose support was related to opposition to immigration. Pat Buchanan was another. Buchanan's presidential campaigns were frequently compared to Trump's because Buchanan also spoke out against immigration—even calling for a wall on the Mexican border—and also performed well among Republicans who shared his view.⁵² For example, a CBS/*New York Times* poll conducted after Buchanan won the 1996 New Hampshire primary had him polling even with the eventual nominee, Dole, among Republicans who said both that immigrants take jobs from U.S. citizens and that the country cannot afford to open its doors to any more newcomers. The difference, however, is that opposition to immigration was less fervent in the Republican Party in the 1990s. Fewer than 20 percent of Republican voters agreed with both statements in that 1996 survey. That percentage would almost certainly be higher today.

Conclusion

In one sense, Trump's rise appeared entirely consistent with earlier presidential primaries and scholarship about them. Primary campaigns often activate the underlying beliefs and values of voters—in essence, telling voters, “If you believe X, then you should vote for candidate Y.” In 2015–16, the Trump campaign signaled to voters which candidate they should choose if they favored entitlement programs or were concerned about the impact of immigration and the situation of white Americans. Although this seemed like an odd coalition on its face, it was not an unusual combination of ideas among Republican voters.

The political logic of Trump's campaign diverged sharply from the advice in the *Growth and Opportunity Project* report that was commissioned after the 2012 election. That report's support for immigration reform to broaden the party's appeal to Latino voters—a position shared by candidates like Bush and Rubio—sought to change how some Republican leaders and voters thought about immigration. Trump did something different. Rather than trying to change hearts and minds, he won over the many Republicans who were already doubtful about immigration's benefits for the country.

Trump's campaign surprised and dismayed many Republicans for another reason: it revealed that many rank-and-file Republicans were not movement conservatives. One conservative analyst, James Pethokoukis of the American Enterprise Institute, described how Republican leaders had often thought about their voters: “These are conservative voters, anti-Obama voters.

We'll give them the same policies we've always given them." What Republican leaders discovered, however, was that those policies were not what all Republican voters wanted. Most voters, even primary voters, are not ideologues. In 2016, those voters finally had someone to vote for.⁵³

As Republican Party leaders dealt with the nomination of Donald J. Trump, they often looked inward—blaming themselves for failing to change the beliefs of Republican voters that supported Trump, or at least for failing to take action that would have defused these voters' concerns. Representative Raul Labrador blamed inaction on immigration: "The reason we have Donald Trump as a nominee today is because we as Republicans have failed on this issue." Others in the party saw an even broader failure. A former staffer from one of the organizations affiliated with the Koch brothers said, "We are partly responsible. We invested a lot in training and arming a grassroots army that was not controllable, and some of these people have used it in ways that are not consistent with our principles, with our goal of advancing a free society, and instead they have furthered the alt-right." A Koch donor said, "What we feel really badly about is that we were not able to educate many in the tea party more about how the process works and how free markets work. Seeing this movement that we were part of creating going off in a direction that's anti-free-market, anti-trade and anti-immigrant—many of us are really saddened by that."⁵⁴

Those comments reveal the range of the Republican Party's frustrations. Trump flouted many Republican leaders' desire for a more conciliatory tone on immigration—and then became the standard-bearer for Republican voters on the issue: in a December 2015 CNN poll, 55 percent thought he was the best Republican candidate to tackle the issue. Trump also flouted many Republican leaders' desire for an orthodox conservative—and then became the candidate of the many Republican voters who never wanted an unfettered free market in the first place. Trump ignored the many Republicans who criticized him for emboldening fringe white nationalists—and then became the champion of white voters with racially inflected grievances.

What Republican leaders did not appear to understand, however, was just how long standing and potent this constellation of sentiments was. Trump tapped into beliefs, ideas, and anxieties that were already present and even well established within the party. His support was hiding in plain sight.

CHAPTER 6

Cracks in the Ceiling

On June 7, 2016, Hillary Clinton stood before a crowd of supporters in Brooklyn, New York, and said, “Tonight caps an amazing journey—a long, long journey.” She had just clinched the Democratic nomination for president after months of campaigning against Vermont senator Bernie Sanders. It was a very different night from eight years before, when, as a New York senator, Clinton had lost a long nomination battle with Illinois senator Barack Obama. Now, after serving as Obama’s secretary of state, she was poised to become his successor.

The Democratic nomination contest in 2015–16 stands out from the Republican contest—and from most recent nomination contests, Democratic or Republican—in one key respect: the unity of party leaders. More party leaders supported Clinton than had supported any candidate since at least 1980. These leaders manifested little of the factionalism and lack of coordination apparent in the Republican contest. Their early support of Clinton helped clear the field for her and sustain her campaign, even when Sanders became a challenger.

Clinton’s success was visible in the share of delegates that she won (figure 6.1). Within a month of the Iowa caucus, she opened a 186-delegate lead that continued to grow for most of the campaign. To overcome Clinton’s lead, Sanders needed lopsided victories in delegate-rich states, but those were hard to come by because the Democratic Party allocates delegates in proportion to primary and caucus outcomes. Thus, Sanders faced, as former Obama strategist David Plouffe put it, “what seems like a small but, in fact, is a deep

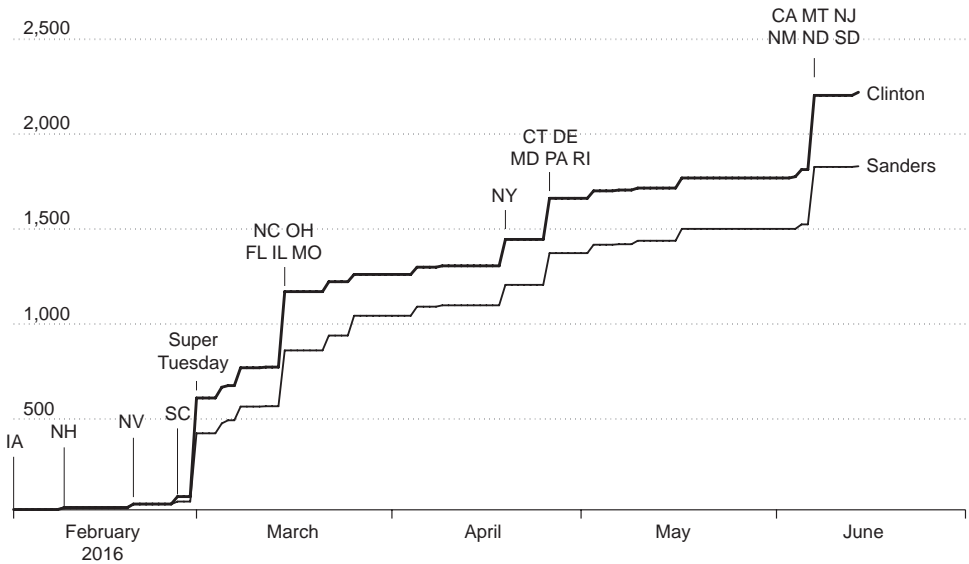


Figure 6.1.
Number of delegates won by Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders.
The graph includes only pledged delegates and not any Democratic “super-delegates.” Data courtesy of Josh Putnam of Frontloading Headquarters.

and persistent hole.” For this reason, Clinton was favored to win throughout the primary campaign. Betting markets, which fluctuated wildly on the Republican side, gave Clinton an 85 to 95 percent chance of winning the nomination for most of the period after the Iowa caucus.¹ Altogether she won 3.7 million more votes than Sanders.

But even if Clinton’s victory was not really in doubt, Sanders’s challenge was significant. When he announced his candidacy, Sanders said, “I think people should be a little bit careful underestimating me.”² This was prescient. In terms of votes and delegates, Sanders arguably overperformed expectations while Clinton underperformed, especially given her extraordinary support among party leaders. Sanders’s challenge was even more notable because he was an avowed “democratic socialist” from the small state of Vermont and had never even been a Democrat. Since 1991, he had served as an independent member of the House and Senate, where he was a frequent critic of the Democratic Party and its leaders.

Sanders’s challenge to Clinton benefited from three things, however. The first was a set of tools, including social media, that helped him generate grassroots enthusiasm and large crowds at rallies and speeches. Second, fund-raising from small-dollar donors bankrolled a professional campaign

even though he received little support from well-heeled donors and party leaders.

The third was media coverage. Sanders faced the perennial challenge of insurgent candidates: how to turn thousands of supporters at local rallies into millions of votes. Just as it did for Trump, media coverage brought Sanders to a wider audience and helped spur his long climb in the polls by conveying the familiar tale of the surprisingly successful underdog. Meanwhile, Clinton received more negative media coverage, in part because of questions about her use of a private email server while she was secretary of state and because of the Clinton campaign's inability to defuse the issue and engage more productively with the news media.

This pattern of news coverage was mirrored in how the voters saw the two candidates. Clinton started the campaign quite popular among Democratic voters—more popular than previous Democratic presidential candidates, including the Hillary Clinton who ran in 2008. But unlike in 2008, her popularity ebbed as Sanders supporters came to view her less favorably. Meanwhile, Sanders came to be seen more favorably, even among Clinton supporters.

What characteristics distinguished Sanders and Clinton supporters? To many election-year commentators, the two candidates were locked in an ideological battle royale. The Sanders campaign was supposedly a potential “watershed in the development of progressive politics,” and Sanders supporters were said to “want the Democrats to be a different kind of party: a more ideological, more left-wing one.”³ But ideology was not the key divide among Democratic primary voters. Although they perceived Sanders as more liberal than Clinton, and Sanders voters themselves were more likely to identify as liberal, there were small differences between Sanders and Clinton voters on many policy issues. In 2016, it was Republican primary voters, not Democrats, who were more divided on public policy and especially economic issues.

Democratic primary voters were also not much divided by gender or attitudes about gender. Despite Clinton's historic achievement as the first woman to win a major-party nomination, she did not garner much additional support from women, even women with a strong gender consciousness. People with more sexist attitudes, especially men, were less likely to support Clinton, but relatively few Democratic primary voters expressed overtly sexist attitudes and the impact of these attitudes faded once other factors were accounted for.

Instead, the important divisions had to do with other identities: party, race, and age. Clinton voters were more loyal to the party, more racially and ethnically diverse, and older. Sanders voters were more likely to be independent, white, and younger. Clinton's coalition in 2016 was actually the racial

inverse of her 2008 coalition: in 2016, she did much better with black primary voters but worse among whites and especially whites with less favorable attitudes toward blacks.

As a result, “identity” mattered in both the Democratic and Republican primaries but in different ways. The divisions in the Democratic primary electorate centered on which groups voters belonged to—Democrat, white, black, and so on. Republican divisions centered on how voters felt about the groups they did *not* belong to, including blacks, Muslims, and immigrants. Feelings about these minority groups did not differentiate Sanders supporters from Clinton supporters, which was no surprise: Sanders and Clinton largely took the same positions on racial issues and immigration.

Clinton’s coalition helped her win because it was composed of groups that were simply more numerous in the Democratic electorate than were the groups supporting Sanders—especially because the party had become so racially and ethnically diverse. But her victory presaged a real challenge: expanding that coalition in the general election.

An Organized Political Party

The writer and humorist Will Rogers famously said, “I am not a member of any organized political party. I am a Democrat.” This stereotype has stuck through the years. While Republicans supposedly marched in lockstep to an increasingly conservative drummer, Democrats were depicted as the fractious party of disparate interests—once upon a time, Northern liberals and Southern conservatives, and then, more recently, feminists, environmentalists, union members, civil rights activists, and so on. The phrase “Democrats in disarray” became a trope of political journalism and commentary. For some time, “disarray”—or at least “less consensus”—characterized presidential nominations in the Democratic Party too.⁴

But in 2016, it was exactly the opposite. This was visible in the pace of endorsements by prominent Democratic leaders during the period before the Iowa caucus (figure 6.2). Unlike in the Republican primary, the Democratic endorsements came swiftly. By the end of the 2016 invisible primary, nearly 83 percent of sitting Democratic governors and members of Congress endorsed a presidential candidate—much more than in any Democratic primary since 1980. The 2016 primary even outpaced 2000, when the sitting vice president, Al Gore, ran in what was a virtual coronation.

Fully 80 percent of these officeholders endorsed Hillary Clinton (see the appendix for this chapter). She received a greater percentage than any other Democratic candidate since 1980, including what she herself had received in

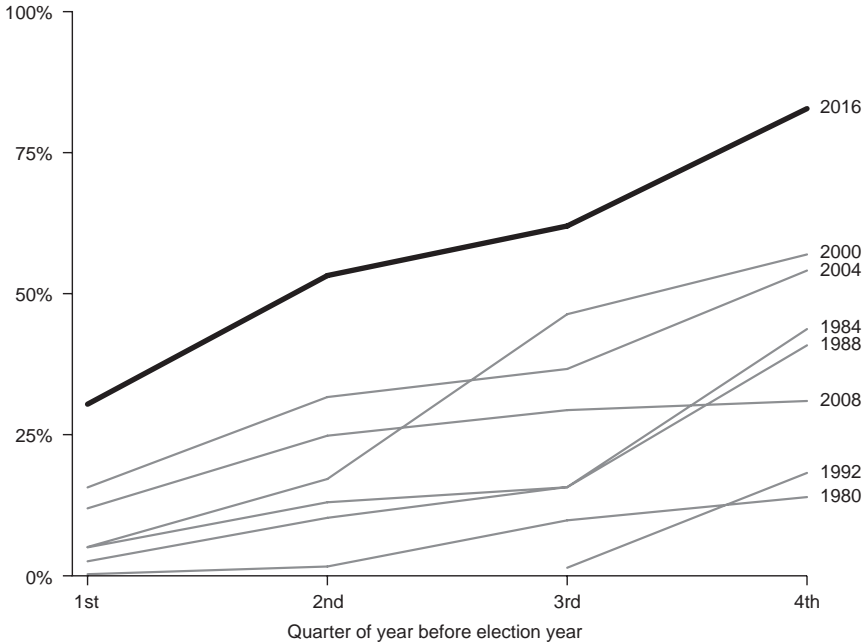


Figure 6.2.

Pace of invisible primary endorsements of Democratic presidential candidates by Democratic governors, senators, and U.S. House members.

Endorsements that occurred earlier are assigned to the first quarter of the year before the election. Endorsements that occurred in the election year but before the Iowa caucus are assigned to the fourth quarter.

2007. In total, she received 201 endorsements from these Democratic leaders. Vice President Joe Biden, who ultimately did not enter the race, received 3. Sanders received 2. Former Maryland governor Martin O'Malley received 1. The other Democratic candidates—former Rhode Island senator and governor Lincoln Chafee, Harvard Law School professor Lawrence Lessig, and former Virginia senator Jim Webb—received none. This put Clinton in a very different, and more dominant, position than she was in during her first presidential bid.

Clinton's dominance can be attributed to several factors. She and her husband, former president Bill Clinton, had developed an extensive network of supporters over their many years in politics. Clinton also had extraordinary experience herself—as first lady, where she was involved not only in the ceremonial aspects of the job but also in policy making and strategy, as a senator from New York, and as secretary of state. For a time, her work as secretary of state was widely admired and, as is common for political figures who are

outside electoral politics, her poll numbers soared. She even earned plaudits from Donald Trump, who said in 2012 that she was a “terrific woman” who “works really hard” and “does a great job.”⁵ By stepping down as secretary of state in early 2013, she gave herself plenty of time to build a campaign and advertise the potentially historic nature of her candidacy.

Clinton succeeded in scaring off many potential candidates. The Democratic field was smaller than in other Democratic primaries in which no incumbent president was running, such as in 1988, 2004, and 2008. Candidates whom some factions of the party urged to run—such as Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren, who was supported by many progressives—stayed out. The biggest nonentrant was arguably Vice President Biden himself. As members of the Obama administration, both Clinton and Biden could claim to be successors. But as vice president, Biden was more obviously “next in line.”

Biden faced challenges, however. His previous presidential primary bids in 1988 and 2008 had not been particularly successful. As of 2013, commentators noted that Biden was less popular than Clinton in polls; many Democratic leaders and strategists believed that Clinton was “dominant.”⁶ Nevertheless, Biden thought seriously of running. Although Biden and his family were grieving after the untimely death of his son Beau from brain cancer in May 2015, reports that summer suggested that Beau and others in the family had urged Biden to run. In late August, Biden met with Warren, leading to more speculation that he would run—even though, at that point, Clinton already had 145 endorsements from Democratic governors and members of Congress.⁷

Ultimately, however, Biden declined. In a speech at the White House on October 21, 2015, he said, “Unfortunately, I believe we’re out of time—the time necessary to mount a winning campaign for the nomination.” Perhaps some of Clinton’s supporters would have defected to Biden, but Biden’s advisers—as well as Obama himself—believed that it was too late. Plouffe, channeling Obama’s views, had told Biden, “Mr. Vice President, you have had a remarkable career, and it would be wrong to see it end in some hotel room in Iowa with you finishing third behind Bernie Sanders.”⁸

This left Hillary Clinton virtually alone in the Democratic field. The other Democratic candidates were gaining little traction. The main opponent, Sanders, was not even a Democrat. No other, more prominent challenger entered the race. She was in a far stronger position than in 2008. Indeed, the last time there had been such a clear successor to a two-term Democratic president—Gore in 2000—he won handily with even less support in the form of endorsements than Clinton had.

But in 2016, Clinton’s victory in the primaries was not as convincing. Even though she raised almost \$128 million by January 2016—more than any other

candidate, Democrat or Republican—Sanders raised a healthy \$96 million despite his lack of support from elected party leaders and their fund-raising networks. Sanders depended instead on small donors: about 61 percent of the money he raised through January 2016 was in amounts of \$200 or less, compared to 18 percent of Clinton's. More than half of Clinton's primary campaign funds were from donations of the maximum amount (\$2,700), but only 8 percent of Sanders's funds were.⁹

Sanders also received a far larger percentage of the primary vote relative to how few endorsements he received during the invisible primary (figure 6.3). On average, candidates who win a higher percentage of the available endorsements also win a higher percentage of the vote, although this relationship flattens out as the percentage of endorsements increases, suggesting diminishing returns. The location of individual candidates relative to this line shows whether they received a higher- or lower-than-expected share of the vote, relative to their share of endorsements.

Sanders won a remarkable share of the vote (43%) for a candidate with almost no support from Democratic leaders. Sanders was similar to Trump, who won 44 percent of the vote despite a lack of support from Republican leaders during the invisible primary. By contrast, Hillary Clinton arguably underperformed. To be sure, no candidate had ever won as large a percentage of endorsements as Clinton did, so it was uncertain what her expected vote share should have been. But it was striking that Clinton won less of the vote than many other candidates who received fewer endorsements—George W. Bush in 2000, Gore in 2000, John Kerry in 2004, Bob Dole in 1996, and George H. W. Bush in 1988. Clinton won only a slightly higher percentage of the vote than she did in 2008 (55% versus 48%), even though far more Democratic leaders publicly supported her in 2016.

Of course, Sanders's vote share was arguably inflated by his remaining in the race to maximize his influence in the party even after it was clear Clinton would win. But Sanders's success was still extraordinary. Like Trump, Sanders managed to win many votes from members of a party with which he was barely identified, if at all. The question is how.

Taking the “Burlington Revolution” National

Sanders began his primary campaign as a virtual unknown. As of March 2015, he was less familiar than nearly every other candidate or potential candidate in either party: only 24 percent of Americans could provide an opinion of him, favorable or unfavorable, while nearly all (89%) expressed an opinion of Clinton. As of July 2015, a little over two months after Sanders announced his

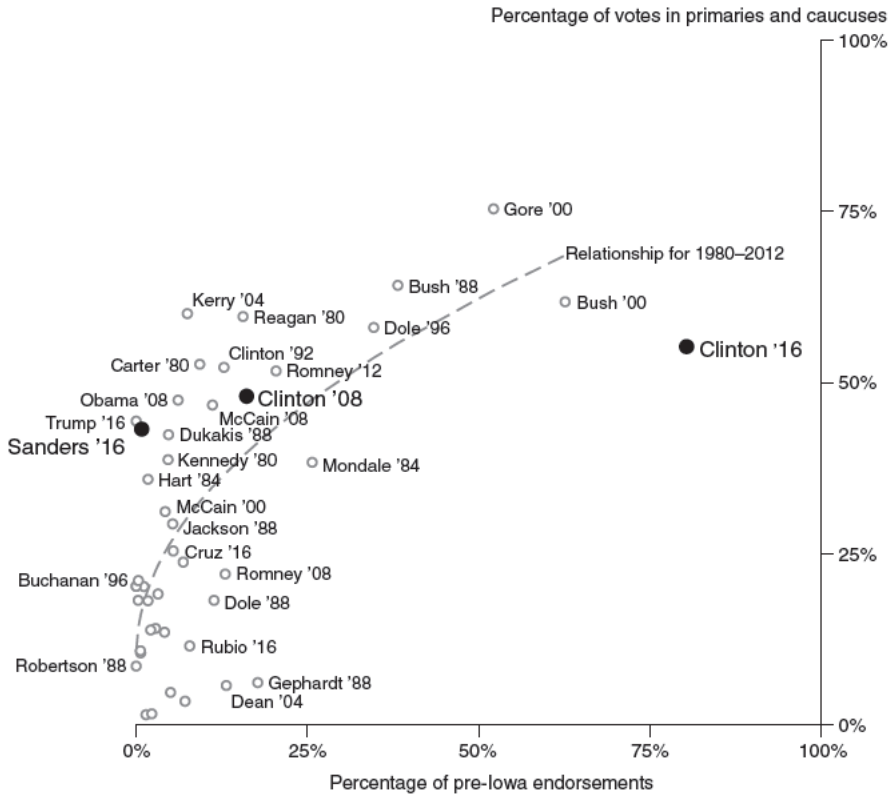


Figure 6.3.

The relationship of pre-Iowa endorsements and total primary vote share for leading presidential candidates, 1980–2016.

The graph includes all primary candidates who won a caucus or primary in at least one state. The graph excludes party primaries in which the incumbent president was running (GOP 1984 and 1992, Democrats 1996, GOP 2004, Democrats 1992). Endorsements are calculated as a fraction of all sitting governors, senators, and members of the U.S. House in a party. The dashed line is a fractional polynomial fit to the 1980–2012 data.

candidacy, 52 percent of Democrats still did not have an opinion of him.¹⁰ For candidates like Sanders, the imperative is to make themselves known, and media coverage is therefore crucial. In 2015, Sanders benefited from increasing news coverage that was more positive than Clinton received.

As the primary campaign went on, a larger and larger percentage of stories about the Democratic primary mentioned Sanders, and a larger number of Democratic voters indicated their support for Sanders instead of Clinton

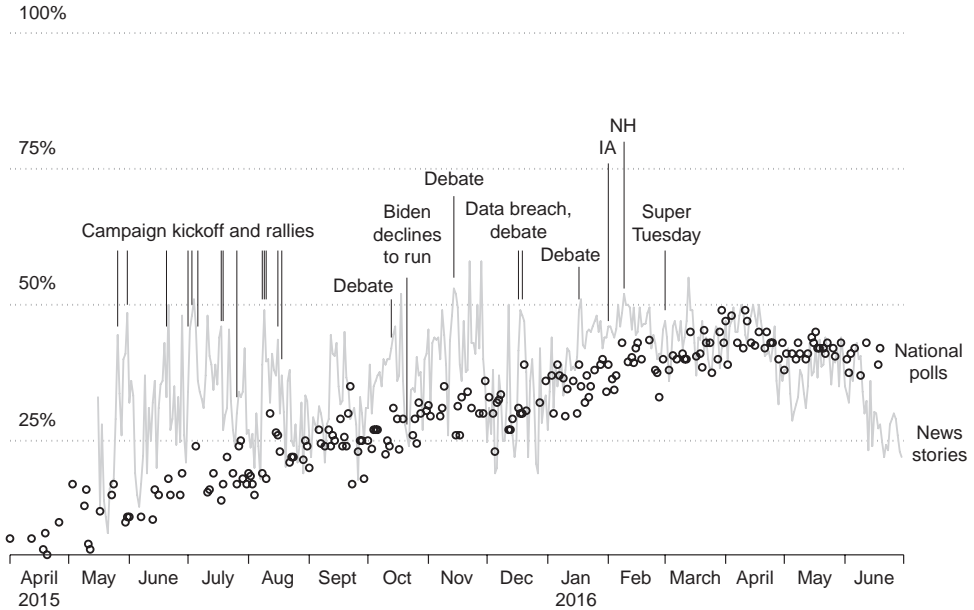


Figure 6.4.

Bernie Sanders's share of news coverage and national primary polls.

The line indicates the share of news stories mentioning Sanders. The dots indicate individual polls, coded at the midpoint of their field dates.

Sources: Crimson Hexagon; Pollster.

(figure 6.4). Sanders's media coverage and polling numbers were strongly correlated: once smoothed to remove small bumps and wiggles, the correlation between the data in figure 6.4 is 0.69—not as strong as the correlation between Trump's media coverage and his poll standing, but still quite strong.¹¹

The catalyst for coverage of Sanders was his official kickoff on May 21, 2015, in his hometown of Burlington, Vermont. What followed was a series of Sanders rallies that attracted larger and larger crowds: an estimated 4,000 in Minneapolis on May 31; 5,500 in Denver on June 20; 9,600 in Madison on July 1; 11,000 in Phoenix on July 18; and then, from August 8 to August 10, 15,000 in Seattle; 28,000 in Portland, Oregon; and 27,500 in Los Angeles. In the early going, at least some of these rally attendees showed up not only because they had seen Sanders in the news but because they had been mobilized by the Sanders campaign and Sanders supporters via Facebook, Reddit, emails, and other social media, or by low-tech strategies like paper flyers and sidewalk chalk.¹² At this point in time, Sanders's share of news coverage far exceeded his share in national polls.

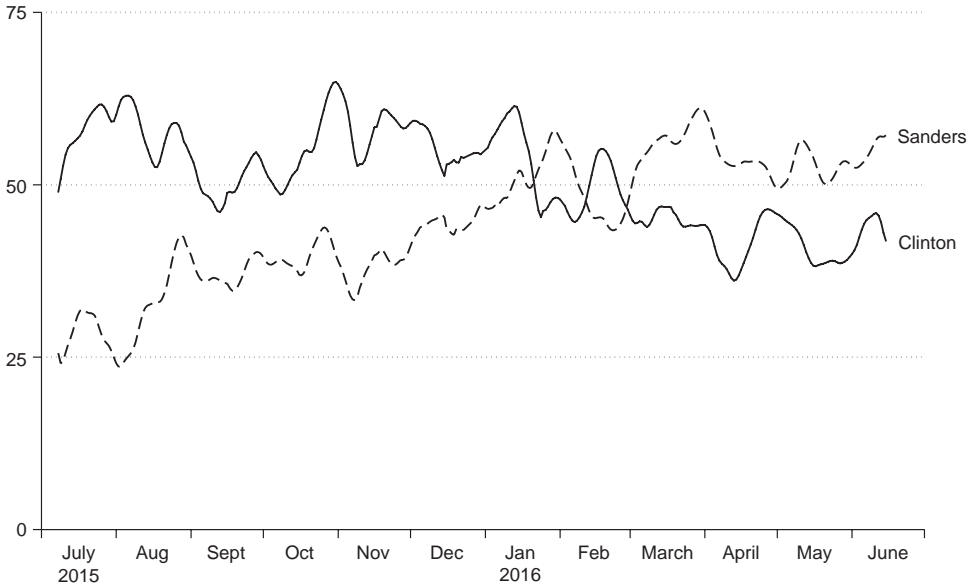


Figure 6.5.

Net favorable ratings of Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders among Democratic voters. The graph depicts the percentage of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents with a favorable view of each candidate, minus the percentage with an unfavorable opinion.

Source: Gallup daily polls.

The question for Sanders was how to turn enthusiastic rallies into meaningful support on a national scale. Many candidates have done better at attracting crowds than winning votes. (Howard Dean in 2004 is one example.) Sanders was often holding rallies where he already had lots of supporters, which was frequently in places outside the crucial early primary or caucus states. So it was appropriate to ask, as an MSNBC headline put it the day Sanders kicked off his campaign, “Can Bernie Sanders take the ‘Burlington Revolution’ national?”¹³

This is where news coverage came in. Many of the spikes in coverage of Sanders came after days on which he held rallies (figure 6.4). This again served the function of “conferring status,” whereby media coverage signals that someone’s “behavior and opinions are significant enough to require public notice.”¹⁴ The crowds at the rallies were interpreted as evidence of a viable campaign, as is often true of horse race news coverage. For example, even before the big rallies, an overflow crowd of 300 at a Sanders event in rural Iowa was framed as a story of Sanders’s “gaining momentum” and possibly mounting a “credible challenge.” Of course, campaigns can orchestrate an “overflow crowd”

by planning an event in a small venue. Nevertheless, Sanders's crowds contrasted with Clinton's small pop-in visits at diners and coffee shops. This translated into news coverage of Sanders that was largely favorable.¹⁵

This increasing and increasingly positive coverage helped give Sanders a national profile—one that Reddit groups and sidewalk chalk alone could not. By the end of August 2015, the percentage of Democrats who had no opinion about Sanders had dropped and the percentage with a favorable view had increased to 53 percent from 39 percent (figure 6.5). Notably, Sanders accomplished this even with Trump dominating news coverage. In fact, across the campaign, more coverage of Trump on cable networks was associated with *more* coverage of Sanders but less coverage of Clinton, Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, and others. Attention to Trump did not come at Sanders's expense.¹⁶

For Hillary Clinton, the initial months of the campaign were quite different (figures 6.5 and 6.6). As Sanders began receiving more news coverage, she received less. As Sanders's poll numbers inched upward, hers fell. Compounding her challenge was the growing attention to Biden, particularly after reports that his family was encouraging him to run. Biden's poll numbers rose in tandem with the news coverage.

When Clinton did make news, it was often because of scandals. The biggest was the issue that dogged her throughout the campaign: her use of a personal email account and private email server, located at her home in Chappaqua, New York, while serving as secretary of state. This was first reported in the *New York Times* on March 2, 2015.¹⁷ Subsequent coverage focused on whether Clinton had violated federal government rules about the use of personal email for conducting government business; why she had eventually turned over only some of her emails to the State Department; and whether her email account and server were secure enough to protect sensitive or even classified correspondence. Clinton's office said that "nothing nefarious was at play" and that they had turned over her official emails while deleting about 32,000 personal emails. As one Clinton aide put it, "If she emailed with her daughter about flower arrangements for her wedding, that didn't go in." Clinton's advisers also said that she had not used a personal email account for classified correspondence.¹⁸

In addition, Clinton faced scrutiny for the work of the Clinton Foundation, a charitable organization that had been established by Bill Clinton. The Clinton Foundation had accepted donations from foreign actors or governments who were also pursuing goals with the Obama administration. There had been contact between Clinton Foundation leaders and officials at the State Department that raised questions about whether Clinton, as secretary of state, had favored donors to the Clinton Foundation. The story emerged in the spring of 2015 with the publication of a book called *Clinton Cash* and a

New York Times article (“Cash Flowed to Clinton Foundation amid Russian Uranium Deal”) published on April 23.¹⁹

These scandals, especially the email server, proceeded in what may be the worst possible way for a political candidate: a steady drip of revelations and news coverage throughout the campaign.²⁰ After a federal judge ordered the State Department to release portions of Clinton’s emails every month, these releases created regular spikes of news coverage, as did the September 8 apology that Clinton released on Facebook. Systematic analysis of that coverage showed it to be very negative. In March 2015, when the email story broke, the percentage of negative references of Clinton outweighed the percentage of positive references by 85 points. Clinton’s coverage became less negative in April, but from April to September there was still much more negative coverage than positive coverage.²¹ The contrast between coverage of Clinton and Sanders was dramatic.

Unsurprisingly, Clinton’s support among Democratic voters weakened. She had begun the campaign with very strong support: in an early March 2015 Gallup poll, 79 percent rated her favorably and only 13 percent rated her unfavorably.²² This was better than her rating, as well as Obama’s, at the same point in the 2008 campaign. It was also better than Al Gore’s in March 2000. By early September, her favorability slipped (figure 6.5) and her support in primary trial-heat polls dropped 17 points (figure 6.6). Stories at this time wrote of “the latest piece of bad news for Hillary Rodham Clinton”; Clinton’s “jittery supporters,” “beleaguered candidacy,” and “weakness in the polls”; how “top Democrats are increasingly concerned about her electability”; and the possibility of an “11th-hour rescue mission” by Joe Biden, John Kerry, or even Al Gore.²³

Sanders still faced challenges, of course. In a late September poll of Democratic activists, 84 percent thought that Clinton could win the general election, but only 49 percent thought that Sanders could. Clinton also led Sanders on the question of who could win the Democratic nomination and who was acceptable to most Democrats. But Sanders’s weaknesses were not the dominant narrative. Indeed, the *Washington Post*’s Philip Rucker and John Wagner noted that Sanders “had not faced the kind of media scrutiny, let alone attacks from opponents, that leading candidates eventually experience.”²⁴

In October, however, Clinton’s fortunes improved. At the first Democratic debate on October 13, Clinton was judged the “clear winner” and was said to have “dominated the debate stage” while showing “experience and self-assurance.” Sanders even defended Clinton from questions about her private email server: “Let me say something that may not be great politics, but I think the secretary is right—and that is that the American people are sick and tired of hearing about your damn emails.” This prompted a standing ovation from

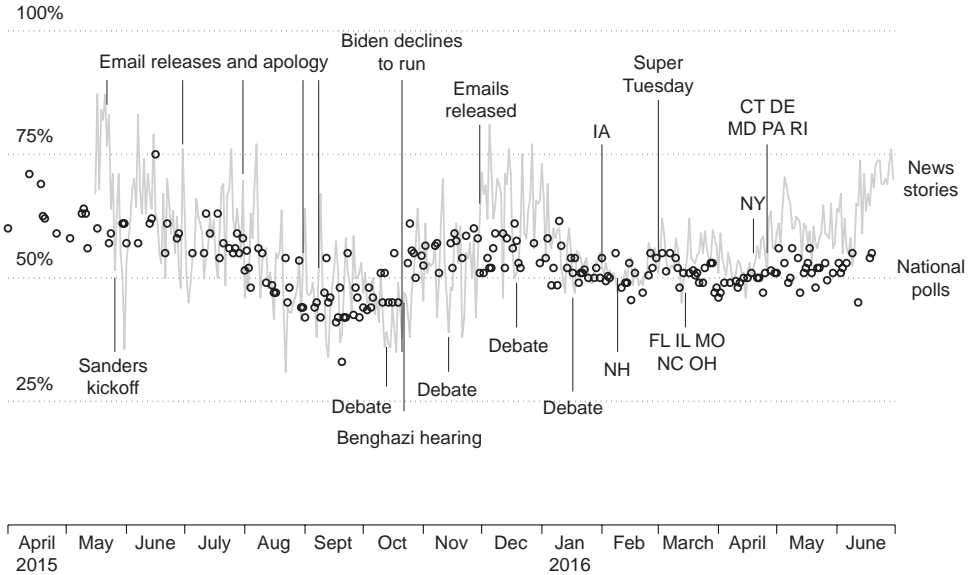


Figure 6.6.

Hillary Clinton's share of news coverage and national primary polls.

The line indicates the share of news stories mentioning Clinton. The dots indicate individual polls, coded at the midpoint of their field dates.

Sources: Crimson Hexagon; Pollster.

the audience. Postdebate polls found that the majority of Democrats thought that Clinton had won. Even Trump declared her “the winner.”²⁵

Clinton also benefited when Joe Biden decided not to run on October 21. Clinton's poll numbers immediately jumped as pollsters stopped asking about Biden, and the race then became a de facto two-person race between Clinton and Sanders (figure 6.6). There was much less change, if any, in Sanders's poll numbers. The same analysis of news coverage that showed Clinton at such a disadvantage for all of 2015 found that in October her coverage was net positive, although only barely so. By the end of the month, her net favorable rating among Democrats had increased 14 points (figure 6.5).²⁶

From that point until early January, little changed in the race—despite additional releases of Clinton's emails, two more debates, and an incident in which Sanders staffers had retrieved proprietary Clinton campaign information from a voter database maintained by the Democratic National Committee. (Sanders apologized for this in the December debate.) Sanders's poll numbers hovered around 30 percent for most of November and December, and news coverage of the polls shifted to emphasize Clinton's strengths.²⁷

Then this changed quickly in Sanders's favor. The sequence began with a surge in televised advertising in Iowa, especially by Sanders. One of Sanders's ads—a minute-long montage of American images and footage from Sanders rallies, set to the tune of Simon and Garfunkel's "America"—elicited very positive responses when it was shown to a representative sample of Americans. Nearly 80 percent said that it made them at least a little bit happy or hopeful. No other ad in 2016 was rated so positively.²⁸

The spike in Iowa advertising coincided with a Sanders surge in Iowa polls. A January 2–7 NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*/Marist Iowa poll showed Clinton leading Sanders by only 3 points. In December, Clinton had led by an average of 16 points. News coverage of this poll emphasized the "tight race" and that Clinton "could lose." In four subsequent polls, two showed Clinton narrowly winning and two showed Sanders winning. Only one poll in all of 2015 had shown Sanders ahead of Clinton in Iowa.²⁹

There is no way to know for sure that the spike in Sanders's advertising helped his poll standing in Iowa. But given that many Democrats did not have an opinion of Sanders even as of early January—roughly 25 percent in national Gallup polls—there were clearly many Iowa Democrats who could be influenced by an advertising blitz. And this same pattern in Iowa had happened before. In late 2011 and early 2012, Rick Santorum surged in Iowa polls after a burst of local campaigning, as did Ben Carson in the summer of 2015.³⁰

Just as it did for Santorum and Carson, an Iowa surge brought Sanders national attention. His share of overall news coverage increased. Sanders was mentioned in 35 percent of news stories in the first week of January, 39 percent in the second week, 44 percent in the third week, and 46 percent in the final week (figure 6.4). Meanwhile, Clinton's average lead in national primary polls shrank from 20 points to 13 points. Headlines said things like, "Hillary Clinton Gets Set for a Long Slog against Bernie Sanders."³¹

The tone of news coverage continued to favor Sanders for the rest of the primary.³² In part, this was because Sanders won twenty-three caucuses and primaries and continued to exceed the expectations of political observers, which is the surest way to generate positive news coverage in a presidential primary. He never experienced a period of intense scrutiny like some Republican candidates received. Clinton herself did not even supply this scrutiny. Although the two had some sharp exchanges in candidate debates, neither attacked the other in television advertising. Altogether, 99.75 percent of the ads that Clinton and Sanders aired during the primaries were positive ads.

The polling trends matched the tone of news coverage. In the initial months of 2016, Sanders became more popular, while Clinton's popularity slipped (figure 6.5). By the end of the campaign, Sanders's net favorable rating was higher than Clinton's among Democrats (+57 versus +42). The decline

in Clinton's favorability contrasts with what happened in 2008. Even after a bruising fight with Obama, her net favorable rating (+48) was the same as at the beginning of the 2008 primary and higher than at the end of the 2016 primary.³³

This decline in Clinton's popularity among Democratic primary voters came about because Sanders supporters viewed Clinton less favorably as the campaign went on. In the RAND Presidential Election Panel Study (PEPS), which interviewed the same voters twice during the primary, 27 percent of Sanders supporters had an unfavorable view of Clinton in the initial interview (conducted December 14, 2015–January 6, 2016). When interviewed in March 2016, 37 percent did. By the end of May, nearly 60 percent of Sanders supporters rated Clinton unfavorably, according to YouGov/*Economist* polls.³⁴ Meanwhile, Clinton supporters grew to like Sanders *more*: in the PEPS, the percentage with a favorable view of Sanders increased from 58 percent in December 2015 to 73 percent in March 2016.

In other words, Sanders's success was not so much about capitalizing on an early reservoir of discontent with Clinton. It was about building support despite her popularity within the party. Clinton's favorability ratings were high early on and experienced no secular decline throughout 2015, even as Sanders's support in trial-heat polls increased. Instead, Sanders's challenge to Clinton appeared to shift the views of his own supporters, making them less favorable to Clinton in the winter and spring of 2016. This helps explain why Clinton's slog was long.

But a long slog did not mean that the race was a nail-biter. Clinton won three of the first four primaries—a narrow victory in Iowa, an unsurprising loss in New Hampshire, a 5-point win in Nevada, and a decisive victory in South Carolina—which gave her a delegate lead that would only grow. By April, Sanders's fund-raising was falling sharply, news coverage of Clinton was increasing, and her national poll numbers improved as well. Her lead over Sanders increased from its low of 6 points in mid-April to nearly 11 points in early June.³⁵

Ultimately, Sanders's challenge, though significant, was never strong enough to put the nomination itself in much doubt. Clinton's coalition was more than large enough for her to win.

“I’m Not Even Sure He Is One”

Hillary Clinton's coalition depended on support from not only Democratic leaders but also Democratic voters. In general, presidential candidates supported by party leaders in the invisible primary do better in the primaries with

partisan voters than with independents, perhaps because party leaders provide cues for partisan voters.³⁶ In 2008, Clinton bested Obama in endorsements and beat him 51 percent to 45 percent among voters who identified as Democrats.

In 2016, partisanship divided voters even more. Despite reliably voting with the Democrats in Congress, Sanders had not invested in the Democratic Party and once described it as “ideologically bankrupt.” As Sanders pondered a presidential run, his advisers told him that he would have to sacrifice some of that independence and run as a Democrat. But when Sanders was asked on the day of his presidential announcement if he was now a Democrat, he replied, “No . . . I’m an independent.” Throughout the campaign, Sanders touted his independence, vowed to take on the political establishment, and railed against the Democratic National Committee and the party’s nomination rules for giving “superdelegate” votes at the party convention to party leaders—who, unsurprisingly, preferred Clinton to Sanders by a margin of 609 to 47. Sanders also dismissed Clinton’s endorsements, including from stalwart progressive organizations such as Planned Parenthood and the Human Rights Campaign, as “establishment politics.”³⁷ By contrast, Clinton touted her party endorsements and her history of working for the party and its candidates. Clinton took Sanders to task for his criticism of the party and his reluctance to raise money for down-ballot Democrats. “He’s a relatively new Democrat,” she said of Sanders, “and, in fact, I’m not even sure he is one.”³⁸

This battle between a quintessential party insider and an ardent political independent made party identification strongly associated with support for Clinton or Sanders even before Sanders’s campaign picked up steam (figure 6.7). In early June 2015, Hillary Clinton had the support of between 60 and 70 percent of Democratic voters, including those who described their partisanship as “strong” and those who described it as “not very strong” (labeled “weak” in the figure). Her support among independent voters who leaned toward the Democratic Party, however, was over 20 points lower. The effect of partisanship then increased during the campaign as voters acquired more information about the candidates. By the end of the primaries, two-thirds of strong Democrats, half of weak Democrats, and only one-third of Democratic-leaning independents preferred her to Bernie Sanders. The same pattern is visible even in partisanship that was measured years before the 2016 primary: in the Views of the American Electorate Research (VOTER) Survey, those who strongly identified as Democrats in 2011 were 25 points more likely to support Clinton than independents who leaned toward the party.

This pattern advantaged Clinton more than Sanders. Democrats were over 70 percent of the primary electorate in most states, according to exit polls. In YouGov/*Economist* surveys, a majority of Democratic primary voters (54%)

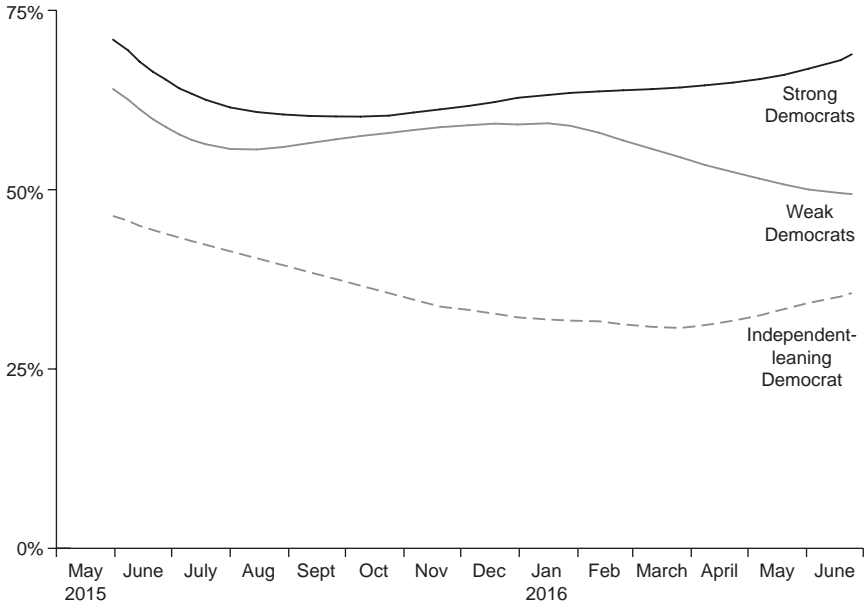


Figure 6.7.

Partisanship and support for Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary.

The lines are smoothed with lowess (bandwidth = 0.8).

Source: YouGov/*Economist* polls.

strongly identified with party. At the same time, Clinton's weakness among Democratic-leaning independents raised concerns going into the general election. In 2008, there was little doubt that Clinton's primary supporters would support Obama in the general election. Even though that campaign was closer than in 2016, Clinton's supporters were still mainly Democrats who overwhelmingly disapproved of the incumbent Republican president George W. Bush's job performance.³⁹ Sanders voters, by contrast, had weaker Democratic identities and were less likely to approve strongly of Obama. Clinton would face the significant challenge of wooing Sanders voters and turning them out to vote in November.

The Inverted Impact of Race

In Hillary Clinton's first major speech as a presidential candidate, she told an audience at Columbia University in April 2015, "We have to come to terms with some hard truths about race and justice in America." She said, "There is

something profoundly wrong when African American men are still far more likely to be stopped and searched by police, charged with crimes, and sentenced to longer prison terms than are meted out to their white counterparts.”⁴⁰ This speech—which she gave during racial unrest in Baltimore after the death of a black man, Freddie Gray, in police custody—echoed her remarks eight months earlier during the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, after a white police officer killed an unarmed black man, Michael Brown. Then, she had asked a mostly white audience to “imagine what we would feel, and what we would do, if white drivers were three times as likely to be searched by police during a traffic stop as black drivers instead of the other way around.”⁴¹ These speeches set the tone of a campaign in which racial justice was a central issue—and one in which the racial dynamics of Clinton’s last presidential campaign were inverted. Once the candidate of white Democrats with less favorable views of blacks, Clinton now depended on her strong support among blacks. The impact of race and racial attitudes in 2016 was very different from in 2008.

Throughout 2016, Clinton addressed racial issues more directly than Obama had. In part, this was because she faced fewer constraints than the country’s first black president, who addressed racial issues less than any Democratic president in modern times and rarely used Clinton’s forceful language in advocating for black interests.⁴² Clinton spoke about the impediments that racial minorities face from “systematic racism” and “implicit biases that we all have.” She put the onus on whites to eradicate racial inequality, telling a mostly black Harlem audience, “Ending systemic racism requires contributions from all of us—especially those of us who haven’t experienced it ourselves. White Americans need to do a better job of listening when African Americans talk about the seen and unseen barriers that you face every day.”⁴³

Clinton’s positions also broke with her complicated history on race. In the 1990s, both Bill and Hillary Clinton supported welfare reform and criminal justice policies that were frequently criticized as harmful to black communities.⁴⁴ In 2008, both Clintons were accused of playing the race card during Hillary Clinton’s campaign. Bill Clinton compared Obama’s 2008 campaign to Jesse Jackson’s 1984 and 1988 bids for the Democratic nomination, leading Senator Ted Kennedy to endorse Obama and worry that “the Clintons were trying to turn Obama into the black candidate.”⁴⁵ Hillary Clinton drew criticism for touting her strong support from “hard-working Americans, white Americans,” while noting that whites without a college degree preferred her to Obama. “These are the people you have to win if you’re a Democrat in sufficient numbers to actually win the election,” she said. “Everybody knows that.”⁴⁶

To win the nomination in 2016 meant appealing to a different party coalition. Two factors made Clinton’s task easier. One was running as Barack Obama’s ally, rather than as his opponent. Obama’s allies often became more

popular among blacks and whites with more favorable views of blacks, whereas his opponents became less popular. In fact, Hillary Clinton was the first public figure to experience this “Obama effect.” Before the 2008 primary, white Democrats with more sympathetic views of African Americans liked her more than whites with less sympathetic views. That pattern reversed itself in 2008, as blacks and racially sympathetic whites gravitated to Obama and less sympathetic whites to Clinton. But after Clinton joined the Obama administration, the original pattern reasserted itself.⁴⁷ Obama’s tacit endorsement of Clinton’s candidacy—he never officially endorsed her but made statements expressing his strong support—likely boosted her chances of winning the black vote.

The second factor was Sanders himself. To be sure, Sanders also staked out progressive positions on racial issues. But Sanders was a little-known senator from a mostly white state who had been criticized by African American activists for preaching a message of economic equality that ignored the intersection of race and class. In 2015, African Americans rated him nearly 60 points less favorably than they did Clinton.⁴⁸

The Clinton campaign therefore viewed states with large minority electorates, particularly in the South, as a firewall that would protect her from potentially poor showings in the largely white states of Iowa and New Hampshire. So, after losing the New Hampshire primary, Clinton and her allies pressed their advantage with minority voters. Before the South Carolina primary, Clinton criticized Sanders’s focus on economic inequality: “We have to begin by facing up to the reality of systemic racism because these are not only problems of economic inequality. These are problems of racial inequality.” She tied herself to Obama, mentioning him twenty-one times in the February 11 Democratic debate, while chastising Sanders for his criticism of the Obama administration. The Congressional Black Caucus also endorsed Clinton before the South Carolina primary, and Representative John Lewis (D-GA), himself a civil rights icon, challenged Sanders’s claims of civil rights activism.⁴⁹

All these factors—Clinton’s explicit racial appeals, her embrace of Obama, black voters’ unfamiliarity with Sanders, her strong support from black politicians—ensured that race’s impact on Clinton’s primary bid in 2016 would be far different from the impact it had eight years earlier. Indeed, in twenty states that held primaries in both 2008 and 2016, Clinton’s average support among black voters was over 60 points higher in 2016 than in 2008 (figure 6.8). In the same states where she had lost 84 percent of black voters to Obama, she took 77 percent of the black vote from Sanders. Clinton did particularly well among blacks who both rated Obama very favorably and said that race was a very important part of their identity.⁵⁰

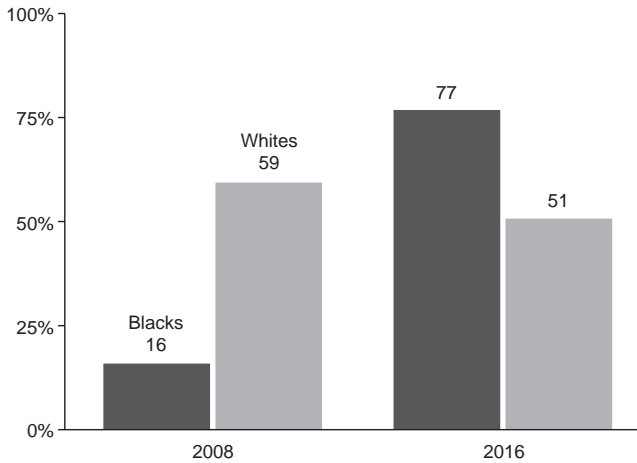


Figure 6.8.

Hillary Clinton's average two-candidate support among whites and blacks in the 2008 and 2016 Democratic primaries.

Clinton's support is calculated as her share of the vote for her and Obama in 2008 and her and Sanders in 2016. The averages are weighted by the number of primary votes for her and Obama or her and Sanders. The twenty states included in the analysis are: Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

Source: State exit polls.

At the same time, Clinton's average statewide share of the white vote was 8 points lower in 2016 than in 2008. In part, this is because the racial attitudes of white voters played a much different role in 2016 from in 2008 (figure 6.9). In 2008, white Democratic primary voters who attributed racial inequality to a lack of effort gravitated to Clinton instead of Obama. In 2016, when Clinton was Obama's ally and not his opponent, these white voters were less likely to support her. The loss of these white voters is one reason that Hillary Clinton performed worse among white voters overall.⁵¹

Clinton won despite this. Indeed, Clinton's 2016 coalition may be the one that Democrats must assemble to win the nomination of a party whose base has become increasingly progressive on matters of race and ethnicity. But this coalition may have come at a cost. After losing the Michigan primary to Sanders, Clinton reportedly felt that "she'd focused too heavily on black and brown voters at the expense of competing for the whites who had formed her base in 2008."⁵² It was not just Michigan, either. In the Ohio and Pennsylvania primaries, both of which Clinton won, her vote margin among whites

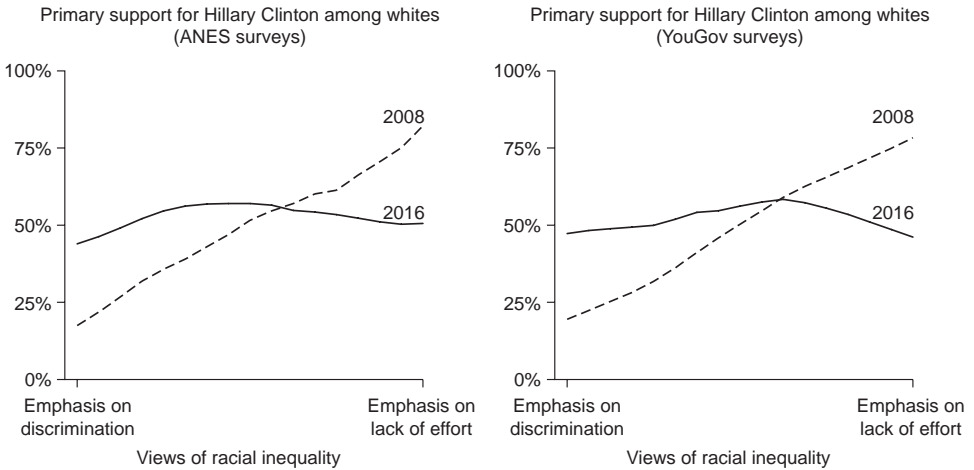


Figure 6.9.

Racial attitudes and support for Hillary Clinton in the 2008 and 2016 Democratic primaries.

Sources: American National Election Studies Time Series (left-hand panel); 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project and 2016 YouGov/*Economist* surveys (right-hand panel).

decreased by 10 points compared to eight years before. Clinton's path to the nomination in 2016 raised the question of whether she could win over the same white voters in November.

The Generation Gap

The other dominant divide in the Democratic primaries involved age. It might seem perplexing that the seventy-four-year-old Sanders could build such support among voters forty or fifty years younger, but it was hardly unprecedented. Age has often divided Democrats in presidential primaries. In 1968, 1972, 1984, 2004, and 2008, the Democratic presidential candidate who challenged party insiders with a “fresh” or “new” perspective garnered more support from younger voters than from older voters.

The attractiveness of new political perspectives to the young has historically derived more from style and rhetoric that appeal to youthful idealism than from policy positions. For example, since 1968, every major third-party candidate for president, regardless of their policy positions, has performed better with younger than older voters. The same has been true in Democratic primaries. In Larry Bartels's study of the 1984 primary, he attributes

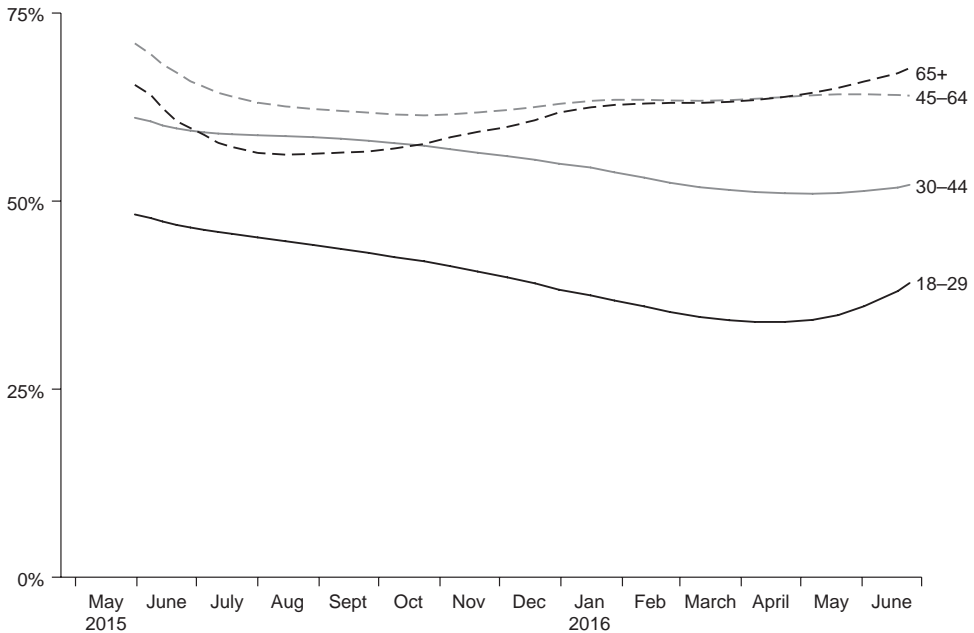


Figure 6.10.

Age and support for Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary.
The lines are smoothed with lowess (bandwidth = 0.8).

Source: YouGov/*Economist* polls.

Gary Hart’s strong support among younger voters to his style and “new ideas” rhetoric rather than his vague issue stands. Similarly, in the 2008 primary, Obama’s support among younger voters had little to do with policies. Democratic voters’ own policy positions were not associated with their preference for Clinton or Obama. Rather, Obama’s popularity with younger primary voters stemmed more from his campaign messages of hope and change, which contrasted with Clinton’s emphasis on the political experience that made her “ready to lead on day one.”⁵³ Clinton’s and Sanders’s rhetoric and style were also quite different. Sanders called for a revolution that would fundamentally change politics. Clinton ran as a pragmatic incrementalist—or, as she put it, “a progressive who likes to get things done”—and criticized Sanders’s approach as unrealistic, much as she had criticized Obama’s “fantastical” message of hope and change in 2008.

Clinton’s challenge with younger voters was evident early (figure 6.10). As the campaign went on, these age differences grew larger. By the end of the primaries, about two-thirds of Democratic voters over the age of forty-five supported Hillary Clinton, compared to half of Democrats between the ages

of thirty and forty-four, and only a third of those under the age of thirty. The problem for Sanders, however, was that there just were not that many younger voters in the Democratic primary electorate. Analyses of voter file data in selected Democratic primary states showed that voters between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine made up only 14 percent of the electorate in Michigan, 12 percent in Texas, and 11 percent in Ohio. This reflects the predictable pattern whereby younger voters turn out to vote at much lower rates than older Americans. Even in the 2008 primary, when Obama's candidacy was thought to have mobilized young voters, eighteen- to twenty-nine-year olds were still three times less likely than senior citizens to vote in the primaries.⁵⁴

If Sanders faced the challenge of mobilizing young voters in the primary, Clinton would face a similar challenge in the general election. Young people certainly continued to lean toward the Democratic Party. Indeed, a Harvard Institute of Politics survey of young people conducted at the end of the primaries found that three-quarters had an unfavorable opinion of Donald Trump. But at the same time, 53 percent had an unfavorable opinion of Clinton. The question was whether young people would turn out to vote in November for a candidate whom many saw as the lesser of two evils.

The Woman Card

Hillary Clinton's bid to become the first female presidential nominee of a major party made gender a constant theme of the campaign. This was, in fact, Clinton's intention. In 2008, she repeatedly said, "I am not running as a woman." But in 2016, she openly embraced the historic significance of becoming the country's first woman president.

Strategizing effectively about gender was never easy for Clinton. Women in leadership roles often encounter a "double bind."⁵⁵ If they conform to masculinized notions of strong and competent leadership, they risk being called aggressive or overly ambitious—"a nasty woman," as Trump would later call Clinton. But if they show compassion or emotion, they risk being seen as ineffective and soft—lacking "the strength" for the position, as Trump said of Clinton in December 2015. The challenge for women is magnified when the office at stake has been held exclusively by men and the job description includes commander-in-chief of the military.⁵⁶

The double bind was evident in Clinton's 2008 campaign, which sought to neutralize the issue of gender even at the expense of her likability. Her chief strategist, Mark Penn, suggested in an early memo that Margaret Thatcher should be the role model: "The adjectives used about her (Iron Lady) were not of good humor or warmth, they were of smart, tough leadership." The political

scientists Regina Lawrence and Melody Rose found, with a few notable exceptions, that Clinton followed Penn's strategy by avoiding gendered appeals and engaging in "not so subtle efforts to 'outmale' her opponents." Perhaps consequently, voters perceived Clinton as a stronger leader than Barack Obama. But, just as the double bind would predict, voters perceived Clinton as less likable than him.⁵⁷

Hillary Clinton's masculinized campaign was arguably one reason that gender had only a small effect on voting behavior in the 2008 primaries. Clinton did perform better with female voters than with men, but this gender gap was modest, particularly in contrast to the enormous racial divide. In Democratic primary exit polls, women were only about 8 percentage points more likely to support Hillary Clinton than men were, on average. Moreover, women who expressed solidarity with other women were not more likely to support Clinton, relative to women who expressed less solidarity. Voters who supported traditional gender roles and expressed resentment of women who demand gender equality were also no less likely to support Clinton. In fact, it was the opposite: those with traditional views of gender roles were more likely to support Clinton over Obama. This is because traditional attitudes about gender are correlated with less favorable views of African Americans.⁵⁸

But a lot changed after 2008. Clinton had occupied the historically male-dominated position of secretary of state and seen her public image reach new heights. Many strategists believed that she could now embrace her gender because she had shown she was "tough enough" for the job during her time as secretary of state.⁵⁹ Clinton did exactly this. For example, in the October 2015 debate she said, "Finally, fathers will be able to say to their daughters, 'You too can grow up to be president.'" She answered a question about being an insider by saying, "I can't think of anything more of an outsider than electing the first woman president," and "Being the first woman president would be quite a change from the presidents we've had." Republicans regularly attacked her for playing the gender card. She always responded the same way: "Well, if calling for equal pay and paid leave and women's health is playing the gender card, then deal me in." After Trump said in April that "the only thing she has going for her is the woman card," the Clinton campaign issued donors a hot pink "woman card" with the phrase "Deal me in" at the bottom.

Did this strategy work? There was some evidence it did. In states that conducted Democratic primary exit polls in both 2008 and 2016, Hillary Clinton increased her vote share by 9 points among women (53 percent to 62 percent) compared to 5 points among men (45 percent to 50 percent), although it is not certain that the difference was due to gender per se. Clinton's argument about daughters may also have mattered: in *YouGov/Economist*

polls, Clinton performed about 8 points better among parents of daughters than among similarly situated parents of only sons. Other studies have found that having daughters makes parents more supportive of feminist positions.⁶⁰ But at the same time, Clinton faced the double bind again despite the shift in her strategy. In a May 2016 YouGov/*Economist* poll, 49 percent said she was a “very strong leader,” whereas only 29 percent said this of Sanders. But she lagged Sanders in likability: 40 percent said that they liked Clinton “a lot” and 21 percent disliked her, whereas 50 percent liked Sanders a lot and only 9 percent disliked him.

The negative consequence of Clinton’s gender was visible in another way: Clinton lost votes among voters with more sexist attitudes, although these losses were mitigated by the fact that there were not very many Democratic primary voters with these attitudes in the first place. A measure of attitudes about gender—called “modern sexism” in the academic literature—helps capture subtle biases against women, such as the belief that there is no real discrimination against women and that women get undeserved special favors. Surveys tap into those beliefs by asking respondents to agree or disagree with statements like, “Women who complain about harassment cause more problems than they solve.”⁶¹

Clinton did worse among the minority of Democratic primary voters who expressed more sexist attitudes, and especially among men (figure 6.11). There was also a strong association between sexism and views of Clinton among Sanders supporters. Male Sanders supporters who expressed some degree of sexism—men often described as “Bernie Bros” during the campaign—were most unfavorable to Clinton.⁶² But the potential electoral impact of sexism in the Democratic primary was muted because there were not that many sexist voters who could penalize Clinton for her gender. Most Democrats and Sanders supporters gave responses that put them toward the progressive end of this modern sexism measure. Clinton lost support among only a small minority of roughly 10 percent or so.

One other way that gender could have mattered for Clinton was if women were attracted to her because of their own gender or feminist consciousness. But there was little evidence of this. For instance, women with the most egalitarian views of gender were not particularly likely to support Hillary Clinton in the primaries (figure 6.11). Moreover, in other surveys, women who said that gender was a very important part of their identity were not more likely to support Clinton than were women who said gender was not important. And women who described themselves as feminists—35 percent of female voters in the Democratic primaries—were no more likely than women who did not identify as feminists to support Clinton over Sanders.⁶³

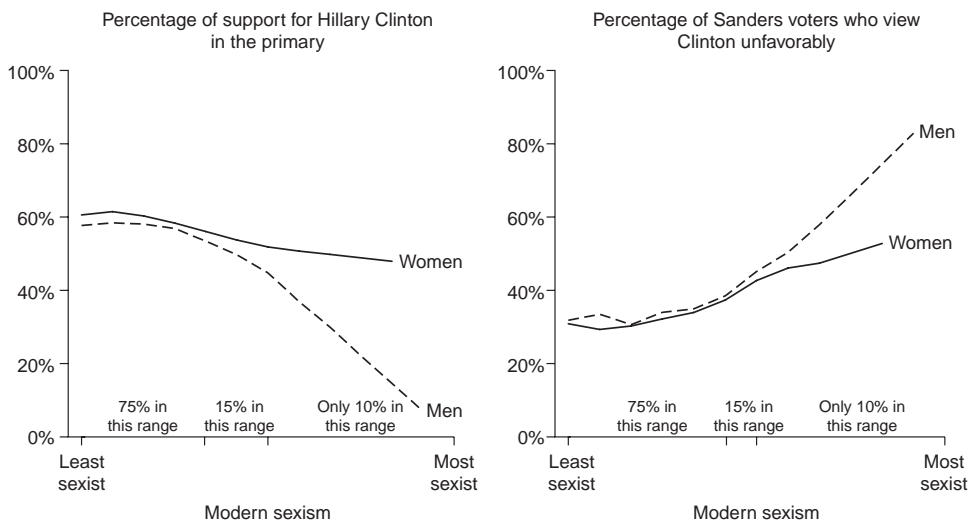


Figure 6.11.

Sexism and views of Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary.

Modern sexism was measured in the December 2015 wave and primary vote and Clinton favorability in the July–August wave. The lines have been smoothed using lowess. The notation along the horizontal axis describes the share of voters along the range of the modern sexism scale.

Source: PEPS.

The weak effects of gender consciousness are not surprising. Unlike racial solidarity among African Americans or racial attitudes among whites, gender consciousness has not typically been a substantial force in modern American political behavior. As the political scientists Nancy Burns and Donald Kinder have written, “The social organization of gender emphasizes intimacy between men and women; the social organization of race emphasizes separation between whites and blacks. Separation fosters solidarity among African Americans. Integration impairs solidarity among women.”⁶⁴

In fact, at least some liberal women were offended by Clinton’s appeals to gender solidarity. Susan Sarandon voiced this sentiment when she tweeted, “I don’t vote with my vagina. It’s so insulting to women to think that you would follow a candidate just because she’s a woman.” One target of Sarandon’s ire, the first female secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, ultimately had to apologize for saying, “There’s a special place in hell for women who don’t help each other,” when she campaigned with Clinton in February 2016.⁶⁵ The episode showed the challenge of galvanizing women with a message of gender solidarity.

Ultimately, then, gender was not the dominant divide in the Democratic primary. This raised concerns about the general election, where Clinton would need support from women to offset possible defections from voters who have more traditional views about gender roles than Democratic primary voters. Her two campaigns for the Democratic nomination suggested that this would be a challenge.

Identity More than Issues

To many observers, the Democratic nomination was not primarily a story of social identity. The story was the fight between the progressive and centrist wings of the party. Sanders supporters were supposed to be well to the left of Clinton supporters on taxes, trade, health care, and so on. But that was not the case: Clinton and Sanders supporters were mostly similar on these and other issues. The choice between Clinton and Sanders depended little on policy battles and more on identities grounded in partisanship and race.

To be sure, voters certainly perceived Clinton and Sanders as ideologically different—and increasingly so as the campaign went on and voters learned more. For example, in the December 2015 wave of the PEPS, 14 percent of Democratic primary voters called Clinton “very liberal,” 43 percent called her “liberal,” and 27 percent called her “moderate” (only 10% could not place her ideologically). Sanders was less well known at that point, with 24 percent unable to place him, but already 36 percent called Sanders very liberal. In March 2016, 48 percent called him very liberal. These perceptions of the candidates were reflected in how Democratic voters described themselves. Sanders voters were more likely to describe themselves as liberal or very liberal rather than moderate or conservative, even when asked five years before the primary itself (see table 6.1). Although identification as liberal usually goes together with identification as a Democrat, the two factors worked in opposite directions in the primary—with strong Democrats gravitating to Clinton and strong liberals to Sanders.

But although Sanders voters tended to describe themselves as more liberal than did Clinton supporters, the two groups differed little on economic policies. This was true when VOTER Survey respondents had been interviewed years earlier, in December 2011 (table 6.1). People who became Sanders supporters were no more likely than people who became Clinton supporters to favor government-provided universal health care or tax increases on the wealthy—although they were somewhat more likely to favor government regulation of business (table 6.1). Combining these three questions into an economic policy index showed Sanders and Clinton supporters to be only 0.02

Table 6.1.
Views of Clinton and Sanders Supporters

	Clinton Supporters	Sanders Supporters
Strength of identification as liberal (Dec. 2011)		
(0 = moderate or conservative; 0.5 = liberal; 1 = very liberal)	0.28	0.40
Views of economic policy (Dec. 2011)		
Economic policy index (0 = most conservative; 1 = most liberal)	0.78	0.80
Federal government provides universal health coverage	73%	74%
Increase taxes on those making \$200,000 or more	84%	86%
Too little regulation of business	44%	58%
Views of economic policy (Jan. 2016)		
Economic policy index (0 = most conservative; 1 = most liberal)	0.79	0.81
Increase government services and spending	58%	61%
Increase government spending for health insurance	81%	83%
Raise the minimum wage	77%	83%
Increase government spending for child care	68%	76%
Favor increasing trade (Dec. 2011)	49%	48%
Views of economy (Dec. 2011)		
Economic anxiety index (0 = least anxious; 1 = most anxious)	0.43	0.48
Economy getting worse	14%	18%
Personal finances getting worse	22%	19%
Views of economy and economic mobility (Jan. 2016)		
Economic anxiety index (0 = least anxious; 1 = most anxious)	0.48	0.60
Economy getting worse versus one year ago	18%	19%
Economy will be worse one year from now	16%	16%
None or little opportunity for average person to get ahead	44%	70%
Compared to parents, harder for you to move up income ladder	42%	66%
Harder for people to improve finances versus twenty years ago	41%	75%

Source: December 2011 refers to the 2016 VOTER Survey, where primary vote preferences were measured in July 2016, and the other measures are from December 2011. January 2016 refers to the 2016 American National Election Studies Pilot Study.

points apart on a 0–1 scale. Sanders and Clinton supporters also had virtually identical attitudes regarding trade policy. Focusing on these earlier data is valuable because it guards against the very real possibility that voters adopted the views of the candidate they came to support for other reasons.

But even in January 2016, after months of campaigning, Sanders and Clinton supporters had similar views on key issues. In the American National Election Studies Pilot Study, Clinton and Sanders supporters did not differ much in their views of government spending overall, spending on health insurance or child care, or raising the minimum wage—as well as on an index combining these items. Large majorities supported these policies regardless of whether they supported Clinton or Sanders.⁶⁶

Sanders supporters were more distinctive in their views of the economy and economic mobility. In both surveys, Sanders supporters expressed somewhat less positive views of the economy than did Clinton supporters. This was true even in December 2011, suggesting these differences were not purely a consequence of campaign rhetoric, including Sanders’s critique of the economy’s health and Obama’s stewardship of the economy. Sanders supporters were also more likely than Clinton supporters to say that there was little or no opportunity for the average person to get ahead and that it was harder to “move up the income ladder.” Of course, those are sentiments that Sanders had been expressing for months, which may mean that Sanders supporters in this survey were merely echoing him. But regardless, differences in concern about the economy and economic opportunity did not translate into distinctive policy preferences.

Other analyses showed the same thing. The political scientist Daniel Hopkins found at best small differences on policy issues between eventual Clinton and Sanders supporters when they had been interviewed in earlier years. Hopkins argued that the factors behind Sanders’s support “do not suggest that it is grounded in an enduring liberalism.” The political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, who were the first to describe the findings from the January 2016 survey, wrote that “Mr. Sanders’s support is concentrated not among liberal ideologues.” Achen and Bartels also located the origins of Sanders’s support in social and political identities.⁶⁷

The important role of these identities stands out in statistical models of people’s preference for Clinton or Sanders in the VOTER Survey (figure 6.12; see this chapter’s appendix for details). The relationships involving partisanship, race, and age persisted: being more strongly identified with the Democratic Party, being nonwhite, and being older were all associated with support for Clinton. Identifying as liberal was associated with support for Sanders. There were also more modest associations between support for Sanders and both economic anxiety and political trust: Sanders did better among those

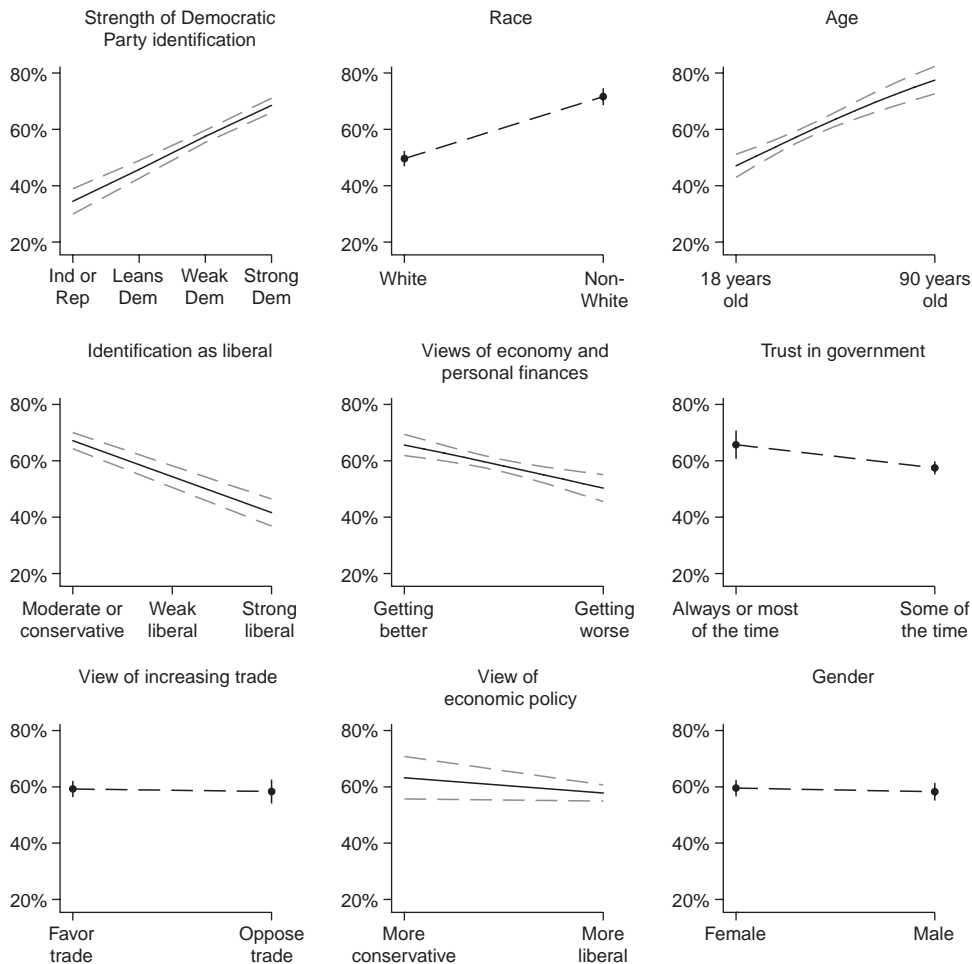


Figure 6.12.

The relationship between Clinton support and various factors.

The figure displays the predicted association between each factor and support for Hillary Clinton, with a 95 percent confidence interval. These are derived from the statistical models in the chapter appendix. Candidate preference was measured in July 2016; other factors were measured in December 2011.

Source: VOTER Survey.

with more concerns about the economy and those who expressed less trust in the government.⁶⁸ Similarly, other surveys showed that Sanders also did better among those who had more pessimistic views of economic mobility and agreed with the statement, “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does” (see the chapter appendix). However, those beliefs were

measured during the campaign and may be consequences, more than causes, of candidate support.

Other explanations received mixed or little support, however. There was little apparent impact of views on economic issues in the VOTER Survey (figure 6.12), and similar findings emerged in other surveys as well (see again the chapter appendix). Sanders and Clinton supporters may have been divided by whether they called themselves liberal, but they were not divided by their actual liberalism on economic policies. Similarly, views of trade had almost no relationship to support for Sanders or Clinton. Although trade was discussed and debated in both parties' primaries, voters' own opinions on the issue appeared to matter little, if it all. The role of gender did not emerge clearly either. Neither gender nor sexism was associated with primary vote preferences, once other factors were accounted for. Views of African Americans, Muslims, or immigration also had weak associations with support for Clinton or Sanders, likely because Sanders and Clinton did not disagree very much about immigration or racial issues.

Ultimately, the impact of partisan and racial identities in the Democratic primary was so strong that the results of the individual state contests could be explained in large part with only two factors: the percentage of African Americans in the state and the percentage of Democrats in the primary electorate (figure 6.13). Clinton performed about 50 percentage points better on average in the states with the largest share of black voters than she did in the whitest ones. This factor alone explained almost 70 percent of the variation in state primary outcomes. Clinton's advantage in these predominantly black states was dismissed by Sanders's advisers early on. They trumpeted Sanders's strength in the early primary and caucus states, such as Iowa, saying, "We're going to show that a prairie fire beats a firewall."⁶⁹ In this case, it did not.

Similarly, in the twenty-seven states that conducted exit polls during the 2016 primaries, Clinton performed over 30 percentage points better on average in states with large Democratic electorates than she did in states with the most independent primary voters. These two factors combined explain almost 80 percent of the variation in state primary outcomes.

Conclusion

Clinton's "long, long journey" to the Democratic nomination began in a very different place from Donald Trump's journey to the Republican nomination. Clinton had the strong support of Democratic leaders, while Trump had virtually no support among Republican leaders. She was perhaps the ultimate party insider, while Trump, like Sanders, was not. Thus, Trump's success in

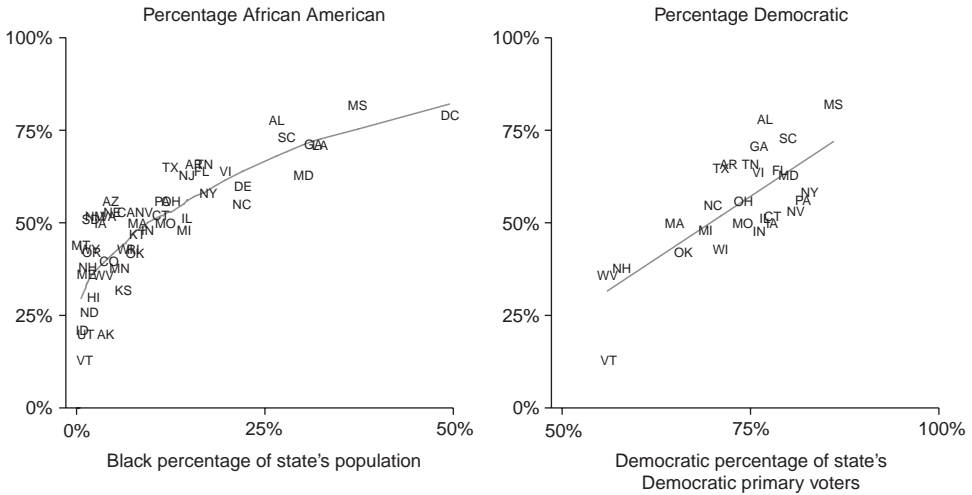


Figure 6.13.

Race, party, and Hillary Clinton's statewide share of the primary vote.

Sources: Democratic primary exit polls; U.S. Census (black population); Dave Leip's Election Atlas (Clinton vote).

the primary, like Sanders's, depended on garnering media coverage and building support among those voters predisposed toward his candidacy.

The support for Trump and Sanders was often assumed to have similar roots. This was wrong in many respects. Trump drew support from people who had liberal views on economic policy and conservative views on immigration but not necessarily any greater economic anxiety. But Sanders's support depended little on views of economic policy and racial and ethnic minorities but somewhat more on economic anxiety.

This was a direct consequence of how the candidates campaigned. Trump defended entitlement programs and criticized the impact of immigration, which put him at odds with many of his competitors. But Clinton's and Sanders's policy differences were more a matter of degree than of kind. Both wanted to increase the minimum wage and taxes on the rich but disagreed about how much. Both wanted the government to ease the burden on college students but disagreed about how far the government should go. It was harder for Democratic primary voters to choose between them based solely on policy issues.

The larger role of economic anxiety in the Democratic primary also follows from what the candidates said on the campaign trail. Every Republican candidate for president railed against Barack Obama's stewardship of the economy, preventing Trump from separating himself from his rivals on this

issue. But it was easier for Bernie Sanders to separate himself from Hillary Clinton. Clinton's connection to Obama made it harder for her to criticize how the country was doing, while Sanders did so freely by focusing on economic inequality and whether ordinary people were really getting ahead.

Social identities were the common force in both parties' primaries, just in different ways. In the Republican primary, Trump campaigned on issues deeply connected to racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, and thus his support depended on how voters viewed blacks, immigrants, and Muslims and whether whites were losing out to these groups. In the Democratic primary, views of racial and ethnic minorities mattered less because Clinton and Sanders took similarly progressive positions on issues like racial justice and immigration. Instead, other dimensions of identity mattered: racial identity (rather than views of racial minorities), partisanship, and age. Clinton's appeal to Democrats, African Americans, and older voters was the key to her victory.

But important questions remained as Clinton pivoted to the general election. Could she unify the party, even though many Sanders supporters viewed her unfavorably? Would she be able to build a coalition beyond just the Democratic base—including not only racial minorities and progressives but also the white moderates or even conservatives who had backed Obama? Many of these were the white, working-class voters that she had said you “have to win.” That was in 2008. The question now was whether she could win them in 2016