



Making Sense of the Rise and Impact of Donald Trump

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Even the savviest of political observers failed to anticipate the rise of Donald Trump's candidacy for president. And while I would certainly count myself among those who underestimated Trump, in a book published two years ago, Karina Kloos and I tracked the growing political, economic, and racial divisions in the contemporary United States that help explain Trump's rise. As we wrote in *Deeply Divided: Racial Politics and Social Movements in Postwar America*, partisan bloodletting and governmental dysfunction during the Obama years have been driven by two major forces: the increasing significance of race in American politics, and interactions between social movements and political parties in our nation's politics. These forces certainly tell us a lot about Trump's strong bid for the White House – and that bid is bound to reinforce both racial and party-movement tensions as it plays out through November 2016.

The Strong Imprint of Racial Reaction in Current GOP Politics

To hear establishment Republicans like Mitt Romney excoriating Trump for his “racist views,” you would think Trump has violated a sacred precept of contemporary GOP politics, when in fact Trump is just giving unusually loud and frank voice to views already typical among large numbers of Republicans. From the mid-1960s, white reactions and racial conservatism have grown within the Republican Party. With Richard Nixon's breakthrough win in 1968, the GOP shifted from being the historically more liberal party on matters of racial equality toward becoming a coalition of racial conservatives with a strong center of gravity in the South, Appalachia, and all-white northern areas.

Over time, the GOP's all-white identity and racial conservatism have only become more pronounced. Ninety percent of those who voted for Romney in 2012 were white, as compared to 60 percent for Obama. And scholars have found that two recently rising GOP forces, Tea Party Republicans and other extreme conservatives, tend to hold more jaundiced views of blacks and Latinos and immigrants than even other Republicans. During the 2016 GOP primaries, when Donald Trump characterized Mexican immigrants as “rapists,” hesitated to repudiate endorsements from David Duke and other white supremacists, and proposed to bar Muslims from entering the country, he merely gave open and flamboyant expression to racial attitudes widespread among GOP base voters. Trump is pushing the racially polarized politics that has characterized the Republican Party for the past half century, but he did not create it.

When Republicans were Racial Liberals

How did the “Party of Lincoln” go from its moderate and at times liberal stance on civil rights in the 1950s and early 1960s to the extreme views embraced by Trump and many other contemporary Republicans? This brings us to the second force touched on above: the centrifugal force exerted by social movements that are pushing U.S. parties toward their ideological margins.

For exactly 100 years – from Abraham Lincoln’s election to the presidency in 1860 to John F. Kennedy’s victory in 1960 – the regional structure of American politics was remarkably stable. Restrictions on black voting plus the white South’s abiding hatred of the Party of Lincoln made the states of the former confederacy the electoral foundation of the Democratic Party. So important was the region to both Democratic electoral and legislative fortunes that even after the rise of the northern liberal, labor-union wing in 1932, Democratic Party leaders remained committed to accommodating the racial “sensibilities” of the South. Major New Deal breakthroughs, for instance, simply did not deliver union rights or social insurance benefits to southern blacks.

When he took office in 1961, President Kennedy was no less committed to this accommodation than his predecessors had been, and so was very slow to respond to black civil rights protest. In contrast, Republicans on the eve the 1960s, while hardly the radical abolitionists of the 1860s and 1870s, were significantly more liberal on racial justice questions than Democrats at that time. Moderate and liberal northern Republicans voted for major civil rights legislation in the early 1960s. But this long-entrenched structure was about to change, very abruptly and with huge consequences for late twentieth and early-twenty-first century American society and politics, consequences still reverberating today.

Social Movements Driving Racial and Partisan Polarization

From the 1960s on, two linked social movements powerfully reshaped America, starting with the civil rights movement. From the sit-ins in 1960, this movement pressured two Democratic administrations, led by John Kennedy and then Lyndon B. Johnson, to put America’s racial house in order. Bit by bit under this pressure, both presidents and by extension the Democratic Party, shifted sharply toward the left on issues of race as well as on a variety of other rights-oriented issues and questions of government responsibility in the economy.

Angered by Johnson’s embrace of civil rights reform, white voters in the “solid South” abandoned the Democrats for the first time in 1964. But a second, larger social movement also gained steam. Although we think of resistance to the civil rights movement as a southern phenomenon, the “white backlash” of the 1960s was in fact a national countermovement. Many northern whites also reacted against liberal Democratic steps to further racial justice and aid poor blacks, and their resistance gave new political openings to the Republican Party. Winning the presidency by running on a “southern strategy” in 1968, Richard Nixon demonstrated to his party the strategic wisdom of courting white racial recalcitrants. What followed for the next 50 years were a series of conservative social movements fueled and led by racially anxious whites – including the tax revolts of the late 1970s, the rise of the Christian Right, and then the Tea Party and “birther” movements challenging the legitimacy of the nation’s first black president.

Social movements are especially influential in U.S. party politics during primary elections, when limited voter turnout amplifies the voice of mobilized groups at the party edges. This tells us a lot about the 2016 GOP primaries. As Trump has proclaimed, his is a movement not a traditional party campaign. Clearly the force of Trumpism has pushed the GOP toward ever further racist and nativist extremes. Whether it carries Trump all the way to the White House remains to be seen.

Read more in Douglas John McAdam, *Deeply Divided: Racial Politics and Social Movements in Postwar America* (Oxford University Press, 2014).