

How Did “the” Party Decide on Trump?

Donald Trump seems to defy the theory that “the party decides” presidential contests. How did he do it?

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Donald Trump’s success in the Republican presidential contest has puzzled those of us who believe that “the party decides.”

For the uninitiated: In 2008, four political scientists argued in *The Party Decides* that it is “the” party, broadly understood as a network of elected, local and state officials, donors, insiders and affiliated interest and lobby groups, that collectively decides presidential nominating contests by nudging voters in the right direction.

Or, as *The Economist* summarized their argument, “parties tell the electorate how to vote, rather than voters telling the party whom to support.”

The four never argued that voters don’t matter. But their research into past presidential primaries, going back to the reforms of the late 1960s which gave ordinary voters more power, suggested that the parties had figured out ways to manipulate the nominating process in favor of their preferred candidate.

In the case of Republicans, that typically meant following William F. Buckley’s advice to nominate the most conservative candidate who could win the general election.

Trump is clearly neither.

Most of what we think of as “the” party agreed from the start. Trump was endorsed by few elected officials. Former presidential candidates John McCain and Mitt Romney both argued against him. Republican-friendly publications, like *National Review*, as well as Republican-affiliated thinktanks and lobby groups, from the Cato Institute to the Club for Growth, actively campaigned against Trump. All to no avail.

So did “the” party fail? That’s one theory and there is something to it.

Party in disarray

Hans Noel, one of the theory’s four framers, has come up with several reasons why the party might have failed this year.

He writes in *The New York Times* that the formerly “invisible primary” has become visible thanks to 24-hour news coverage and the Internet, making it harder for party actors to deliberate behind the scenes.

The Republican Party’s factions, from business conservatives to the religious right to the white nationalist wing Trump has reinvigorated, have grown so far apart that they’re now impossible to reconcile.

Or perhaps Trump is just such an unusual candidate that no institutional safeguards could have stopped him.

As a result of all this, Noel argues, the party could not decide on a consensus candidate.

Jeb Bush had to vie for the support of the Republican mainstream with Marco Rubio and, to a lesser extent, Chris Christie and John Kasich. If the four center-right candidates had been wrapped into one, they could have easily bested Trump in the early voting states. The contest might then have developed into a more traditional standoff between a mainstream Republican and a champion of the hard right (probably Ted Cruz).

Cruz quickly consolidated the religious vote, but he failed to appeal to other Republican constituencies until it was too late.

There was something of a concerted effort to stop Trump after he swept the South in early March. A few right-wing donors, most of whom had stayed on the fence for longer than usual this year, wrote cheques and party-affiliated institutions, like the Club for Growth, ran television commercials against Trump.

It all proved too little, too late.

The argument then is that “the” party didn’t so much fail as failed to show up in time.

But that only begs the next question: Why?

Whose party?

Conor Friedersdorf has a theory: Our idea of what “the” Republican Party means is outdated.

He writes in *The Atlantic* that those elements of the party that sent pro-Trump cues or “Trump is at least acceptable” signals to the electorate — Rush Limbaugh, Sarah Palin, Ben Carson, Chris Christie, *Breitbart*, *Drudge Report*, *The New York Post*, Bill O’Reilly, Sean Hannity, Ann Coulter, Jeff Sessions, Rick Scott, Jan Brewer, Joe Arpaio — are now more powerful than *National Review*, Mitt Romney, John McCain and other “Trump is unacceptable” forces than previously thought.

I made a similar argument in January, when I wrote about the previous generation of anti-establishment conservatives. The movement that produced *National Review*, the Heritage Foundation and Fox News really did battle a liberal establishment in both parties — but it long ago vanquished the liberal right. They *are* the Republican establishment and have been for quite some time.

They might not see it that way, but their children do. *Breitbart*, *Drudge Report*, talk radio — these represent the next round of radicalization. Yesterday's leading lights are today's traitors to the cause.

I argued in another article in December that the mainstream right has for too long not only tolerated these radicals; it has actively encouraged them in an effort to pry away white working-class voters from the Democrats.

Friedersdorf highlights some of the worst cues and signals even anti-Trump Republicans have sent their voters that made the rise of a populist demagogue possible:

- Career politicians cannot be trusted. This widespread conceit in “the party” has effectively made it impossible for candidates with governing records and public sector experience to be accepted by large swaths of Republican primary voters.
- When the base doesn't get what it wants, it's because of betrayal by party elites, never because a majority of Americans disagrees with them.
- Rhetorical stridency is a better heuristic for loyalty than core principles or governing record.
- Complaints about racism and sexism are always cynical fabrications, intended to be used as cudgels against conservatives.
- Political correctness is one of the biggest problems facing America.
- Illegal immigration poses an existential threat to the nation.
- President Barack Obama has deliberately made bad deals with other countries to weaken the United States.

If something good will come of Trump, it may be that sensible Republicans will finally recognize the damage they have done not just to their party but to the governability of their country.

Years of radicalization on the right cannot be turned back to save the party from a calamity in November. Even if all Republicans stop indulging their voters' worst instincts today and start tempering the base's expectations instead, Trump is already the presumptive nominee and he has fired up millions.

The question is what happens next? Can the two parties Friedersdorf described be reconciled? Or is a schism, as I predicted in February, inevitable?