

MINNPOST

How did Trump become the GOP nominee? Edsall cites Citizens United and media changes

Eric Black

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In his weekly New York Times column, Thomas Edsall returns to the question of how we got Donald Trump as president. He ignores Hillary Clinton completely (her name is not mentioned) and he doesn't focus much on the general election at all. Rather, he returns to the prior question: How did we get Donald Trump as the nominee of one of our two major parties?

Using his usual method of emailing scholars and other experts and insiders, Edsall's starting point is that:

For four decades, from 1968 to 2008, what was loosely described as the Republican establishment — the party's congressional leaders, campaign operatives, donors, lobbyists and special interests — reigned supreme.

At least the Republican establishment had veto power. And the establishment did not want Donald Trump to be its nominee. But the sources of its power over the nomination had declined dramatically. The establishment used to control most of the campaign money, for example, through campaign arms that were actually part of the Republican Party. But the Supreme Court's "Citizens United" ruling broke that grip. Writes Edsall:

This becomes glaringly apparent in a comparison of the pattern of fund-raising in 2008, the last election before the Citizens United decision, to the pattern in 2016. In the 2008 election, the three major Republican campaign committees raised a total of \$657.6 million, six times the \$111.9 million spent by nonparty conservative organizations.

By 2016, however, the amount raised by the three Republican committees stagnated at \$652.4 million, while the cash raised by conservative groups grew sevenfold to \$810.4 million.

In practical terms, the creation of a new and massive source of campaign support freed candidates to defy the establishment. This is just what the Tea Party did in 2010 and 2014.

The importance of campaign spending also changed, because of changes in the ways Americans get information in the internet age.

Changes in the media environment during that same four-decade span were huge. Edsall quotes Michael Tanner of the Cato Institute, who wrote to him:

“The establishment, such as it is, still exists, but its influence has been permanently weakened by changes in the media,” not just by conservative media, but by social media that “enables candidates to reach their respective bases in an inexpensive way. Endorsements and money mean less and less.”

Ideological media outlets on both the left and right, Tanner argues, “carry more weight than ever before,” displacing establishment influence over candidate selection, because both sides are now more dependent on mobilizing base voters than in persuading the ever-smaller faction of uncommitted voters.

The GOP establishment, even when it had been in control, naturally wanted to expand its electorate so it could win more elections. The white working class had been in its sights for several cycles. And their wish came true.

Scott Keeter of Pew Research tells Edsall that “non-college white voters cast a solid majority — 62.7 percent — of all the votes Trump received in the 2016 election. “

That was unprecedented. Trump as the nominee was, in some sense, the price the GOP paid for turning those working class whites into Republican voters.

Is this going to be the new normal? I don’t claim to know, and Edsall doesn’t exactly say. But for some reasons mentioned above, and plenty more that Edsall explores, there are things about the old normal that will never come back.

Edsall ends with a quote from a Republican strategist who wasn’t willing to be named:

The post-Trump world is a Humpty Dumpty story. No one is going to be able to put things back together again.