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Why Trump – and How Far Can He Go?

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Introduction

Like most pundits – and most political scientists – I did not see this one coming. I was not terribly surprised when, on June 16, 2015, Donald Trump announced that he was running for president. As more and more presidential debates are held before the first primary, and as more and more of these debates are nationally televised, we have gradually begun to produce a set of candidates who enter the presidential race not because they have a realistic chance of winning their party's nomination, but because it is a good career move. They get a boatload of free publicity, and if they were not running for president, it is not clear what else they'd be doing.

So it was no great surprise that Donald Trump, who absolutely craves publicity, decided to get into the race. And since early presidential polls do not measure much except name recognition, I was not surprised that the first national poll conducted after his announcement found that he had the support of 11 percent of the country's Republican identifiers. The shock is how much support he has gained since then, and how long he has held on to it. According to the realclearpolitics website, which collects results from all the major polls and then computes a running average, it was July 20 when Trump first broke into the lead in the national polls of Republican identifiers, at which point he was supported by, on average, 17 percent of party adherents. By August 6, he was up to 24 percent, declined a bit over the next 3 weeks, then shot up to 30 percent in late August and early September. Through the rest of September, Trump's support declined by about 5–7 percentage points, leading many to hope that the Republican electorate's fascination with him had finally run its course. But in mid-November, his poll numbers once began to increase, a trend that, as of this writing, had yet to break. On December 31, again according to realclearpolitics.com, 36 percent of the nation's Republicans wanted Donald Trump to be their party's next presidential candidate. His nearest competitor, Ted Cruz, had the support of 19 percent.

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All of which brings us back to the question posed in the title of this article: Why Trump? Why has this blustery, narcissistic, electoral newcomer, with four bankruptcies, three marriages, and no durable ideological convictions except an overwhelming belief in himself managed to shoot to the top of what was once thought to be a strong field of Republican presidential prospects? There are, I will argue, four major explanations for Trump's success.

The "Non-Politician" Factor

Besides his bluster and the size of his ego, one of Donald Trump's most conspicuous traits is that he is a political newcomer. He has never run for elective office before, never held any kind of appointive position in government. To many Americans, this makes him a poor candidate for president of the US, but for others, it is one of his principal attractions. As befits a country that began in a rebellion against established authority and a strong central government, a major theme in American political culture has been a suspicion of governmental power – and, therefore, of those who hold it. Many voters would prefer to have their candidates drawn after the model of the Roman hero Cincinnatus: someone who would heed the call to governmental service for a short period of time and then return to his previous occupation.

One should not exaggerate the strength of this attitude. On this matter, as on many others, the American public is highly ambivalent. In a Fox News poll conducted in May, 2015, 82 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement that, "We need to recruit and support more candidates for office who are ordinary citizens rather than professional politicians and lawyers." Yet in an NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll taken just 1 month earlier, 35 percent said they would be "very uncomfortable" with a presidential candidate who was "not a politician and [had] no previous elected experience in government," while another 35 percent said they would have "some reservations" about such a candidate. Only 30 percent said they would be either "enthusiastic" or "comfortable" with a president who was a political newcomer.[1]

Fortunately for Trump, there is considerable evidence that the anti-politician sentiment is much stronger in the Republican Party than within the Democratic Party. In 1995, for example, when the House of Representatives considered a constitutional amendment that would have established congressional term limits,

1 Results are taken from Fox News poll of May 9–12, 2015; and NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* survey of April 26–30, 2015.

Republicans supported the amendment 189-40; Democrats opposed it, 40-163. The reason for the difference is that, since the New Deal, the Democrats have been the party of positive government. Democrats routinely campaign for office by talking about all the good things that government – or at least, a Democratically-run government – can do for people: provide them with health care, relieve them of their educational debts, increase their wages, and so forth. And if this is your basic perspective, being in politics can readily be seen as a honest and noble profession.

Republicans view the world through a different set of lenses. In practice, as any libertarian will remind you, most Republicans have also voted for a lot of expensive, big government programs. Democratic campaign propaganda notwithstanding, Republicans have not voted to eliminate Social Security or Medicare, have not dramatically downsized the American welfare and regulatory state, have in fact expanded it in many cases, George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act being a prime example. But at least at the level of rhetoric, Republicans certainly talk a different game. In Republican speeches and writings, government is frequently portrayed as a sinister force that tends to do a lot more harm than good. Ronald Reagan, for example, famously said things like, "Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." And: "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are, 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'" When your leaders say things like that, it's hardly surprising when many of your adherents come to view a career in politics as shady and disreputable, as something you'd do only because you do not have the talent or the gumption to make a living in a more respectable profession.

The result is that Republicans, much more than Democrats, have shown a persistent fondness for political newcomers, for candidates who can say that they are not career politicians. The most remarkable demonstration of this propensity came in late September of 2015, when the top three candidates in the Republican polls – Trump, Ben Carson, and Carly Fiorina – were all political newcomers.[2] But this is not the first time that large numbers of Republicans have been swept off their feet by a presidential candidate with no previous political experience. In the 1996 election cycle, businessman Steve Forbes, who had never run for office before and had held just one minor appointive position in government, nevertheless decided that he would make a very good president and therefore entered the Republican presidential race. After heavy television spending in the early primary and caucus states, Forbes briefly led the polls in New Hampshire and

2 Fiorina soon faded, and Carson's numbers have been in decline throughout November and December. He is now in fourth place in the national polls, behind Trump, Cruz, and Rubio.

was running a strong second in Iowa. Though he actually finished fourth in both contests, he later won the Delaware and Arizona primaries. In 2012, businessman and presidential candidate Herman Cain attracted considerable support from Republicans based on his performance in the televised debates and his euphonic 9-9-9 tax plan. According to realclearpolitics, Cain led the Republican presidential field from October 20 to November 10, 2011, after which his candidacy was derailed by accusations of marital infidelity and sexual harassment and he withdrew from the race.

Going a bit further back in time, only two major-party presidential nominees since 1932 can be described as political newcomers, people who had not spent a substantial part of their adult lives serving in and seeking political office, people who had never run for elective office before seeking the presidency. The two were Wendell Willkie in 1940 and Dwight Eisenhower in 1952. Both men were, not coincidentally, nominated by the Republican Party.

The only parallel to this phenomenon in the Democratic Party – the only novice candidate who won a significant amount of support in a recent Democratic presidential contest – was Jesse Jackson.[3] Like Forbes and Trump, Jackson had a long-standing interest in matters political, but he had never actually worked in government or run for elective office until he set his sights on the presidency. Nevertheless, he won 18 percent of the Democratic primary vote in 1984, 29 percent in 1988. In Jackson's case, however, all the evidence indicates that he won votes not because he was a political newcomer, but in spite of that fact. Such success as Jackson had was due to his being the first major Black presidential candidate and to his position on the far left-side of the political spectrum, which would have made him unelectable in a general election but did win him the allegiance of many White Democrats. Had Jackson been White, I think his lack of governmental experience would have been seen by many of the people who voted for him as a dispositive reason not to support him.

As someone who has spent a substantial part of his adult life studying, writing, and teaching about politics, I insist on saying that there is nothing terribly logical about the idea that the way to make government work better is to elect people who have never worked in government before. Certainly this is not the way we think about most other fields of human endeavor. If your current doctor is giving you really bad advice or treatment, you might want to fire him, but to replace him, you would not hire someone who had no previous

3 Jimmy Carter in 1976 also claimed that he was "not a politician," but the facts of his biography speak strongly to the contrary. Carter first ran for the Georgia state senate in 1962 and spent the next 18 years either holding office or campaigning for his next one.

medical training or experience. You'd hire a *different doctor*. Similarly, if a bank president had embezzled a lot of money or grossly mismanaged the bank's operations, you'd no doubt get rid of him, but you would not replace him with somebody who had never worked in a bank or a large corporation. You'd want someone who was not associated with the old bank president, but who was nevertheless highly experienced in managing a complex financial enterprise.

So if Republicans do not like the way Barack Obama is running things, their best course of action, in my opinion, is to nominate someone who has very different policy ideas than Obama, who would take the country in a different direction, but who is highly skilled and experienced in the ways and practices of government. At present, however, mine is apparently a minority viewpoint.

The "Man on Horseback" Factor

Americans have long been known as a pragmatic people. They like movement and action. Whatever their ideology, they believe that most problems can be solved if only we have the will and the proper leadership. We live, however, in what is usually characterized as a time of stalemate and gridlock, when the words *fast*, *effective,* and *efficient* are rarely applied to the workings of American national government.

Lots of Americans are thus strongly attracted by the prospect of a man – or woman – on horseback: a bold, decisive individual who will sweep away all the quibblers and naysayers, the obstructionists and the special interests, and just get something done. The persona Trump cultivated in "The Apprentice," a show that was on prime-time television for 11 years, was a perfect fit for this kind of appeal. Every week showcased Trump in a position of apparently complete authority, dispensing advice, subjecting the contestants to a severe grilling, and, of course, summarily "firing" anyone who did not meet his high standards.

Of course, all candidates try to project an image that they are men or women of action, that they will make Washington throb with movement and activity. But even in comparison to other presidential candidates, Trump has a remarkably elevated opinion of his own abilities and of all he will accomplish if elected. It is one thing for a presidential aspirant to promise that he will build a wall along our southern border; only Trump has claimed that he can make "Mexico pay for that wall." Trump's announcement speech also included the assertion that he would be "the greatest jobs president that God ever created"; and that he would "rebuild the country's infrastructure. It will be done on time, on budget, way below cost….

I look at the roads being built all over the country, and I say I can build those things for one-third."[4]

The only other recent presidential candidate I can think of who made such sweeping claims as to how much he would get done as president was Ross Perot, whose 1992 campaign resulted in the second-best finish by an independent or third-party presidential candidate in the last 150 years. Like Trump, much of Perot's appeal was that he promised action. If you go back and read Perot's speeches in the 1992 presidential debates, for example, you will find that over and over again he emphasized two principal themes. One was that his campaign came, as he put it, "from the people": that he did not take money from special interests, political action committees, or foreign lobbyists; that five and a half million ordinary people "came together on their own and put me on the ballot." Perot's second and more immediately relevant appeal was that he was a man of action. I have "a lot of experience in getting things done," he said in the first debate. "I've got a lot of experience in figuring out how to solve problems, making the solutions work, and then moving on to the next one. I've got a lot of experience in not taking 10 years to solve a 10-min problem." On several occasions, he seemed to suggest that we already knew how to solve all our major problems; we had just failed to adopt and implement the solutions. "There are great plans lying all over Washington," he said at one point, "nobody executes them. It's like having a blueprint for a house you never built…. Now our challenge is to take these things, do something with them." Speaking of the various plans to create jobs in the inner city, Perot said, "I'm not a politician, but I think I could go to Washington in a week and get everybody holding hands and get this bill signed." Of Medicare and Medicaid, he insisted, "Everybody knows how to fix them. There are people all over the federal government, if they could just touch it with a screwdriver, could fix it." At another point, he promised to meet with congressional leaders and reach agreement on a set of plans to deal with the economy, defense, crime, health care, and the schools by Christmas – not Christmas of his first year in office, mind you, but the Christmas before he was inaugurated.[5]

It is no accident that Trump and Perot made such similar claims, for they had two important things in common: They were successful businessmen; and they had never actually held political office. Business is one of the few areas in American life where a top executive does have a substantial amount of power to hire and fire his subordinates, to determine how much to pay them, to make

4 All quotations are from Trump's announcement speech, as reported at time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech (Accessed December 30, 2015).

5 All quotations are from the transcripts of the first and second presidential debates of 1992, available at www.debates.org (Accessed January 1, 2015).

unilateral decisions about what projects the company will and will not undertake. Had either of them actually had any significant experience in government, on the other hand, both Trump and Perot would have found it considerably more difficult to sustain the fiction that they could turn government around with a snap of their fingers. Except in wartime and perhaps a handful of national emergencies, the American system of government was set up so that one determined individual could not create and implement policies on his own. That's what the separation of powers is all about. And as every recent president has found, no matter which party is in the majority, Congress does nothing very quickly. A President Trump would also find his freedom of action hamstrung by civil service laws that constrain whom he can hire and fire, and by procurement regulations that would prevent him from devising and signing contracts with anything like the speed to which he may be accustomed in his business dealings. He would also discover that many of the projects he wants to accomplish – building highways is a good example – are not actually performed by the federal government. The federal government provides most of the money, but interstate highways are built, owned, and operated by state governments.

If you're interested in trying to figure out what a Trump presidency would look like, it's worth saying that while we've never had a businessman elected to the presidency without any previous governmental experience, that sort of thing happens quite regularly in gubernatorial elections. A long list of people started their governmental careers by being elected governor, including Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, Mitt Romney, Jesse Ventura, and Arnold Schwarzenegger. At present, four sitting governors were elected to their current office without any prior work in government, including Rick Scott in Florida and Bruce Rauner in Illinois. As these lists may suggest, some of these neophyte governors were reasonably effective, some were not, but none absolutely revolutionized state government, making it perform with a breathless efficiency and effectiveness that no one else had ever dreamed possible, as both Perot and Trump effectively promised.

Trump's Critics and the Credibility Gap

Much of the Trump campaign has been characterized by the following dynamic: Trump says something that "respectable opinion" regards as simply outrageous, utterly beyond the pale. Many illegal aliens bring drugs and crime. John McCain is not a war hero. Carly Fiorina could not be president because of her face. The government should establish a database to keep track of Muslims. Commentators

widely predict that this "gaffe" will mark the end of the Trump campaign – only to discover several days later that Trump's poll numbers either have not changed or have actually gone up.

Why have not these episodes taken more of a toll on Trump's popularity? One answer is that they have. As I will show in more detail later in this article, Trump is probably the most generally unpopular political figure in America today. A hard core of the Republican primary electorate has stuck by him, enough to make him the leading candidate in the Republican race, but most Americans strongly dislike him. Anyone who thinks that Trump's campaign has been a big hit with the majority of Americans has plainly not looked at the available survey data.

Still, to give the man his due, a significant minority of Republican identifiers have rallied behind Trump's banner. And while this group is not entirely impervious to campaign events – as noted earlier, Trump's support did decline noticeably in September – his campaign has survived a series of controversies that, one suspects, would have readily torpedoed most other candidates.

The principal explanation for Trump's resilience, I believe, is that his major critics – in particular, the media and the established Republican Party leadership – have little very credibility with many Republican voters. To start with the media: Unless you have been marooned on a desert island for the last 50 years, you know that the so-called mainstream media have received a lot of criticism. As one reply to these denunciations, members of the media sometimes claim that they get attacked from both ends of the political spectrum, which has the happy result of implying that the media are located firmly in the center and get criticized only because they insist on telling the truth without fear, favor, or bias. In fact, however, media criticism is not equally fervent or widespread within the two major parties. By all sorts of measures, Republicans and conservatives are a lot more upset with media performance than Democrats and liberals. A good illustration of this point comes from a question that the Gallup Poll asked in 2010: "In general, do you think the news media are – too liberal, just about right, or too conservative?"[6] Republicans had no doubts about this issue: 76 percent of Republicans said the media were too liberal, just 6 percent said the media were too conservative. Democratic views were much less antagonistic: 26 percent of them said that the media were too conservative, but an almost equal number, 22 percent, actually said that the media were too liberal. The most popular answer among Democrats, chosen by 48 percent, was that the news media got things "just about right."

6 The question has been asked several times since 2010, with little change in the overall results. I cite the 2010 poll here because it is the last one for which I have been able to find a breakdown by party identification.

Against that background, it should as no great surprise that media criticism has had so little impact on Trump's candidacy. If you could interview a typical Trump supporter, I think he or she would reply to these attacks in something like the following terms: "Most of the people who are criticizing Trump are people who endorsed Barack Obama's candidacy in 2008, often suggesting that he would make not just a good but a genuinely great president. For the last 7 years, they've also done their best to suppress or downplay half a dozen scandals that would be major news stories if they had been committed under a Republican president. So why would any self-respecting conservative believe these same people now when they tell us that Donald Trump would make a bad president?"

As recent events have demonstrated, many rank-and-file Republicans are similarly distrustful of their own party's leadership. This is, it should be said, not a terribly unusual situation for contemporary American party leaders. In a time of highly polarized parties, party activists and primary voters tend to cluster at the extreme ends of the political spectrum. Elected officials are probably sympathetic with many of these opinions, but they also face the constraints imposed by political reality. Though few seem to remember it today, when Ronald Reagan was president he, too, received a fair amount of criticism from his party's right wing.

But the current Republican leadership has, I believe, a particular problem in this regard. Many rank-and-file Republicans are clearly upset that the party has accomplished so little in restricting the growth of government or repealing Obamacare, even though it now has majorities in both houses of Congress. The greatest source of irritation, however, is the issue of illegal immigration. While many in the Republican base think that the party's congressional contingent has been insufficiently aggressive in trying to reduce the federal Leviathan, the rank-and-file at least have the consolation of knowing that they and the party leadership are on the same page, that they're pushing in the same direction. On immigration, by contrast, the policy favored by much of the party leadership is sharply at odds with the concerns and preferences of its mass base.

As a great deal of survey data shows, a solid majority of Republican identifiers believe that illegal immigration is a serious problem. Though many on the left would claim otherwise, I do not think this sentiment can be dismissed as simple xenophobia. There is ample evidence that the US does not have anything like adequate control of its own borders and that the consequent flood of illegal immigrants imposes a number of significant costs on the country, including increased crime rates, increased welfare expenditures, decreased wages for the poorest categories of American workers, increased drug smuggling, and increased risk of terrorism.

Yet the Republican leadership has by and large refused to take these concerns seriously. Like a lot of the Republican Party's problems, this one begins

with George W. Bush. Especially in his second term, Bush pushed for a policy that he called "comprehensive immigration reform," which would have legalized current illegal immigrants and provided them with a path to citizenship while also establishing a new guest worker program that would have allowed millions of additional immigrants into the country. In return, Bush promised to strengthen border security and enforce current laws against illegal immigration more vigorously – a promise that most individuals and groups who were seriously committed to reducing illegal immigration thought the administration would never keep. Comprehensive immigration reform, in short, was widely viewed as a Trojan horse, which would have allowed Bush to move national policy in what most Republicans regarded as the wrong direction. Bush and his political advisors always seemed much more interested in cultivating Hispanic voters and pleasing the businesses that wanted cheap immigrant labor than in heeding the wishes of the typical Republican voter.

In the end, the Bush plan encountered a great deal of opposition and never made it through the House of Representatives. But many Republicans have refused to take no for an answer. In the wake of the 2012 election, a special report commissioned by Republican national chairman Reince Preibus urged the party to "embrace and champion comprehensive immigration reform" (Republican National Committee 2013, p. 8). In 2013, four Republican senators, including Marco Rubio, co-sponsored the so-called Gang of Eight immigration bill that was, critics charged, even worse than the Bush plan. Jeb Bush also endorsed this bill. In talking about the issue, moreover, many Republican candidates seem a lot more concerned with abiding by the canons of political correctness than with recognizing how upset many people are about the effects of illegal immigration. Jeb Bush famously described illegal immigration as "an act of love, … an act of commitment to your family." John Kasich said that illegal immigrants "contribute a lot to America," and said he might be willing to give illegal immigrants a path to citizenship because "I don't want to see anybody in pain," as if no one was pained by the high levels of illegal immigration.

It is no accident, then, that the first major controversy surrounding Trump's candidacy involved the immigration issue. In an often-quoted passage in his announcement speech, Trump said that Mexico was sending us "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." A case can clearly be made that Trump's choice of words was too sweeping. But there is in fact good evidence that the crime rate among illegal immigrants is far higher than the crime rate among native-born Americans and legal immigrants, and that precisely because we do not have adequate control of our borders, we cannot set up a system that would

allow us to keep out convicted criminals and those whom we have previously deported.

So I doubt many Republican voters were impressed when lots of other Republicans – and lots of commentators and editorial writers – criticized Trump for his indelicate comments. As many ordinary voters told reporters in subsequent stories, they were delighted to hear someone say something that clearly condemned illegal immigration and recognized that it does bring harm to the larger community.

What's the Alternative?

Finally, Trump has claimed the lead in the 2015 Republican nomination contest because none of the more conventional candidates has managed to establish him- or herself as the clear alternative. There are two points here that deserve notice. First, at the start of the 2016 race, there was no obvious front-runner for the Republican nomination. As shown in Table 1, this is a relatively unusual state of affairs for the Republican Party. In recent nomination contests, the Republicans have had a striking tendency to start the "invisible primary" period[7] with a clear front-runner, who had a substantial lead over the rest of the field and then went on to win the nomination. That front-runner, moreover, was often what one might call the "heir apparent," a major national party leader who had been the second-place finisher in the previous nomination contest.

The 2012 race was a partial exception to that pattern: Though running against a very weak field of opposing candidates, Mitt Romney, the second top vote-getter in 2008, had nothing like the robust support enjoyed by most other early front-runners. In the four Gallup Polls of the Republican nomination contest conducted during the first 6 months of 2011, Romney was supported by just 17 percent of his party's identifiers. This made him a "front-runner" only because all the other announced candidates were doing even worse.

The 2016 Republican contest started out the same way. If you had to call one candidate the early front-runner during the first half of 2015, that candidate was Jeb Bush – but he clearly was not much of a front-runner. Of the 23 national polls listed at realclearpolitics.com, Jeb led the field in just nine of them (he was tied

7 The invisible primary is the name given to the extended period of campaigning and maneuvering that precedes the first actual delegate selection event (usually the Iowa caucuses). For purposes of this article, the invisible primary begins on January 1 of the year before the election.

Table 1: Early Front-Runners in Recent Republican Presidential Nomination Races.

Election Year	Early Front-Runner	Average Poll Percentage[a]	Claim to Heir-Apparent Status
1980	Ronald Reagan	44	Second top vote-getter in 1976; prominent Republican governor
1988	George H.W. Bush	35	Second top vote-getter in 1980; incumbent vice president
1996	Robert Dole	42	Second top vote-getter in 1988; Senate majority leader
2000	George W. Bush	49	Son of last Republican president; prominent Republican governor
2008	Rudolf Giuliani[b]	34	Mayor of New York City when World Trade Center was attacked
2012	Mitt Romney[c]	17	Second top vote-getter in 2008
2016	Jeb Bush	15	Son of one Republican president; brother of another

[a]Figure is the average percentage supporting that candidate in Gallup polls of Republican identifiers conducted during the first 6 months of the year before the election.
[b]The Republicans eventually nominated John McCain, who ran second in most of the early polls.
[c]Mike Huckabee, who chose not to run in 2012, was the leading candidate in the first in two polls; after Huckabee withdrew, Romney led in all the remaining polls up through June 2011.
Source: All polling data are taken from the Gallup Poll except 2016, which is based on the results reported at realclearpolitics.com.

for the lead in three others). On average, just 15 percent of the potential Republican electorate wanted Bush to be the 2016 presidential nominee.[8]

With no dominant early front-runner, there was no obvious person to rally around when Trump broke into the lead, no person to rival him in the polls. As mentioned earlier, Trump first claimed the lead in the polls of Republican identifiers on July 20, when he had the support of just 17 percent of party members. In a more typical election cycle, this would have put him well behind candidates like Reagan in 1979, Dole in 1995, George W. Bush in 1999, or Rudy Giuliani in 2007.

8 Based solely on recent history, the other plausible candidate for early front-runner status in 2016 was Rick Santorum, the second top vote-getter in the 2012 Republican primaries. But Santorum's impressive showing in 2012 – he won 20.4 percent of the total primary vote – clearly had more to do with the weakness of that year's Republican field than with Santorum's own appeal. In any event, Santorum received, on average, just 2 percent of the vote in polls conducted in January through June, 2015, so I think we may say with some confidence that he was not the early front-runner.

Not only was there no major front-runner in this year's Republican race, none of the conventional candidates has run a particularly skillful or inspiring campaign. In 1988, as readers of a certain age will remember, one of the leading explanations for George H.W. Bush's comeback victory against Michael Dukakis was the claim that the Republicans had an experienced, fire-tested team of consultants and strategists directing their campaign – Lee Atwater, James Baker, Roger Ailes, Robert Teeter – whereas the Dukakis campaign was led by a group that was, by and large, working in their first national campaign. In more recent years, however, it is hard not to conclude that Democratic presidential strategists have consistently outperformed those on the Republican side. In 2012, in particular, the Romney campaign team of Stuart Stevens, Beth Meyers, Neil Newhouse, Lahnee Chen, et al. was perhaps the weakest ever assembled for a modern presidential general election. As I have argued in detail elsewhere (see Mayer 2012), the Romney general election campaign was a highly flawed, mistake-ridden effort, that probably cost the Republicans an election they might otherwise have won.

And the mistakes just keep on coming. With the possible exception of Carly Fiorina, it is difficult to think of any Republican presidential candidate whose campaign could be described as conspicuously well-run. What strikes one instead is the number of major, unforced errors.

Consider three examples:

1. Marco Rubio. As of late 2012, no candidate seemed better positioned to win the 2016 Republican presidential nomination than Marco Rubio. A senator from one of the two most important swing states in the nation, of Cuban ethnicity, with a compelling personal story, Rubio had also been a Tea Party favorite when first elected to the Senate in 2010. And then, in one move, he went a long way toward neutralizing all those advantages. In early 2013, he became one of the "Gang of Eight" that co-authored a comprehensive immigration "reform" bill that was widely seen as granting Democrats virtually everything they wanted and getting almost nothing in return. Rubio himself has since admitted it was a mistake.

   I have yet to see a good "inside" account of why Rubio decided to sign on to this legislation. Perhaps he did so on his own initiative, against the advice of all his consultants and political advisors. But if any of his advisors urged to take this step – or simply failed to warn him that he was about to cut his own political throat – he plainly needs a new set of political advisors. As anyone who had watched the course of immigration reform bills during the Bush and Obama administrations should have known, any bill that increased the levels of legal immigration and offered a path to citizenship for those who were here illegally was certain to be immensely unpopular with the Republican base.

If Rubio fails to win the nomination, this one decision will almost certainly bear a major share of the blame.

2. John Kasich. Another person who seemed to be well-positioned in late 2012 was John Kasich: governor of the other major swing state, from a working-class background, with a solidly conservative record during his 18 years in Congress. He could also lay legitimate claim to being one of the three people most responsible for the balanced budgets of the late 1990s (the other two are George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton). Yet, somehow, his campaign has tried to position him as the most moderate candidate in the 2016 field, the second coming of Jon Hunstman. (He even hired Huntsman's principal strategist, John Weaver, to serve a similar role in his campaign.) It is hard to imagine why anyone looking at the results of recent nomination contests in both parties would conclude that running as a moderate was a winning strategy.
3. Bobby Jindal. Not so very long ago, Jindal was widely viewed as a force to be reckoned with in Republican national politics: a Rhodes scholar, an expert on health-care policy, a member of another growing minority group (Asian Americans) that would seem to be more sympathetic to Republican policies than Hispanics are. In 2009, he was chosen to give the Republican response to Obama's first State of the Union address.

For sitting governors who hope to win their party's presidential nomination, there is, by now, a time-tested strategy for achieving that goal. Step 1: Up through the mid-term immediately preceding the election, do not spend a lot of time out of state, campaigning in Iowa and New Hampshire, making overseas trips, and trying to look "presidential." No one is paying attention at that point, and home-state voters are likely to become resentful if it appears that their governor is neglecting his governing responsibilities. Instead, concentrate on governing well. Step 2: Once the midterm is over, start campaigning intensively. This was the approach adopted by Michael Dukakis in 1988, Bill Clinton in 1992, and George W. Bush in 2000.

The Jindal campaign unaccountably decided to do the opposite. After winning a second term as governor of Louisiana in 2011, Jindal spent much of the next several years on the road and thus dramatically reduced his gubernatorial approval ratings. In 2015, however, Jindal was among the last major candidates to launch his campaign, not formally announcing his decision to run until June 24. After trailing badly in the polls throughout the summer and fall, Jindal finally withdrew from the race on November 17.

How Far Can Trump Go?

Whatever the precise mixture of causes, Trump has been leading the Republican nomination race for the last 5 months. To date, of course, his "lead" has been registered only in the polls. Will he continue to dominate the competition when the primary and caucus season begins in early February? And if he does win the Republican nomination, how will he fare in the general election?

As I have acknowledged earlier, the 2016 Republican presidential nomination race has already defied most predictions. In previous writings about the contemporary presidential nomination process, I have often argued that national polls of party identifiers taken during the invisible primary period are a good predictor of who will eventually win the nomination (see Mayer 1996, 2004). Yet, here, too, the 2016 indicators are ambiguous. As shown in Table 2, of the candidates for a party nomination who had the support of at least 40 percent of their co-partisans in December of the year before the election, seven of eight went on to win the

Table 2: National Poll Standings at the End of the Year before the Election as a Predictor of Nomination Outcomes.

Year and Party	Leading Candidate	Percentage of the Vote	Did Poll Leader Win?
2000 Republican	George W. Bush	62	Yes
2000 Democratic	Al Gore	53	Yes
1996 Republican	Robert Dole	49	Yes
1980 Republican	Ronald Reagan	47	Yes
1980 Democratic	Jimmy Carter	46	Yes
1988 Republican	George H.W. Bush	46	Yes
2008 Democratic	Hillary Clinton	45	No
1984 Democratic	Walter Mondale	40	Yes
2016 Republican	Donald Trump	36	?
2012 Republican	Newt Gingrich	34	No
2008 Republican	Rudy Giuliani	27	No
1988 Democratic	Gary Hart	25	No
2004 Democratic	Howard Dean	25	No
1992 Democratic	Jerry Brown	21	No

Source: 1980–2012 results are based on the Gallup Poll. 2016 figure is based on the December 31, 2015 result reported on realclearpolitics.com.
"Percentage of the vote" is the percentage of party identifiers who supported the leading candidate in December of the year before the election.
When there was more than one December poll, poll results were averaged.
In 1988 and 1992, there was no December poll, so result was interpolated from polls conducted in October and January of the election year.

nomination. Of those who were supported by 34 percent or less, by contrast, not one of five was nominated. As of December 31, 2015, 36 percent of Republican identifiers wanted Trump to be the party's 2016 presidential nominee, placing him in an undetermined middle ground between likely winners and likely losers.

Two variables are likely to determine Trump's fate in the nomination race. First, will Trump's support fade as the actual primary and caucus season approaches and voters perhaps consider their choices more seriously? It has been widely bruited that various Republican groups and Super PACs are planning to launch an all-out attack on Trump. For all his resilience to date, it is hard to believe that some consultant can not find a set of attacks that will materially reduce Trump's support. It may also be the case, as Popkin (1994) has argued, that context matters. It is one thing for voters to register their dissatisfaction with the Republican Party and the political system by telling a pollster they will vote for Trump; many may hesitate, however, when it comes to actually casting a ballot for him.

Second, what happens when some of the less successful candidates start to withdraw from the race? As I have already suggested, one reason for Trump's lead in the polls is that the "non-Trump" vote is divided among so many other candidates. Though a number of candidates have already exited the race, there are still (as of December 31, 2015) at least nine other Republican candidates who receive at least 2 percent of the vote in an average national poll. Based on past experience, it is very likely that many of these candidates will drop out if they fare poorly in Iowa and New Hampshire. But what happens then? What many Republicans hope, of course, is that most Republicans who are well-disposed toward Trump are already supporting him, that the "non-Trump" vote is thus, in effect, an anti-Trump vote, and that the other 65 percent of Republicans will eventually rally around one of the more conventional candidates, such as Ted Cruz or Marco Rubio. Primary voters, however, often behave in unexpected ways. Should Jeb Bush or Chris Christie exit the race, many of their erstwhile supporters might not vote at all; others might jump on the Trump bandwagon, even if Bush or Christie were to endorse one of the other contenders.

And what will happen if Trump does win the Republican nomination? Not to mince words, I think there is very little chance that Donald Trump can win a presidential general election. Trump clearly revels in all those polls that show him leading the race for the Republican presidential nomination. Next time he's looking at his poll numbers, he might want to take a glance at how he's doing in the general election matchups against Hillary Clinton, for these polls tell a very different story. Yes, there is an occasional poll that shows Trump leading Clinton – but there are not many of them. Of the 30 national polls taken between August and December 2015 which pit Trump against Clinton, Clinton

led Trump in 25 of them, Trump had a lead in three polls, and two showed a tie. Nor is there any trend which might suggest that Trump is gradually narrowing Clinton's lead. As of January 1, 2016, Clinton had beaten Trump in all of the last 11 national trial heat polls.

This result cannot be excused on the grounds that the Republican nomination race has been more hotly contested and has featured more high-visibility debates. In general election terms, Trump is actually the weakest of the major candidates vying for the GOP nomination. According to the running average of national poll results maintained by realclearpolitics.com, Trump currently loses to Clinton by 5.0 percentage points, but Cruz trails Clinton by just 0.6 percent, and Rubio is beating Clinton by 1.6 percent. Even Jeb Bush, whose campaign Trump has snidely dismissed as a "total disaster," is doing far better than Trump in the general election polls. Bush trails Clinton by just 1.3 percentage points.

Why is Trump doing so poorly in the general election matchups? The simple answer is that while Trump's boorish behavior and obvious lack of preparation for the job may not have scared off a hard core of Republican primary voters, they have had a devastating impact on his standing among moderates and independents, the key constituencies that almost always decide general elections. According to pollster.com, another website that aggregates results from lots of different polls, no major figure in contemporary American politics has higher negatives than Donald Trump. On average, just 34 percent of American adults have a favorable opinion of Donald Trump, while 57 percent view him unfavorably. Even Hillary Clinton, for all the shots she has taken over the last several years, is rated more positively than Trump. Her numbers are 42 percent favorable, 52 percent unfavorable.

Most of the indicators that pundits and forecasters typically use to handicap presidential elections indicate that 2016 should be a good year for Republicans. The economy is not in great shape; Obama's approval ratings have been underwater since mid-2013. And in seven of eight cases since 1952, a party that has been in the White House for the previous 8 years, the situation facing the Democrats in 2016, has lost the next presidential election. Compared to Barack Obama in 2008 or even John Kerry in 2004, moreover, Hillary Clinton enters the 2016 contest with a lot of baggage. No doubt the Democrats will try once again to run against George W. Bush, but with Bush out of office for 8 years, these appeals are likely to seem increasingly stale.

But Republicans can not just sit back and let the electorate register their dissatisfaction. The GOP must do its part, one essential element of which is to nominate a candidate who will be seen as a plausible president, someone who won't scare off a substantial part of the electorate regardless of who his opponent is.

By all present indications, Donald Trump will fail that test.

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