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2016: Fire Bell in the Night Or False Alarm?

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Introduction

The 2016 presidential election has been widely regarded as one of the most portentous in our history. This is not because it was (at least ostensibly) a podium for great divisive issues, but because of what has been happening to the process by which the President is chosen.

As that process unfolded, there were recurring signs of an unstable political culture. Designated Democratic heiress-nominee Hillary Clinton found herself significantly challenged by a highly improbable contender: 74-year-old Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, an old-time Jewish socialist from Brooklyn. No less unexpected was the implosion of designated Republican heir-nominee Jeb Bush. Most improbable of all was the nomination triumph of politically virginal and behaviorally outrageous Donald Trump. The ultimate assault on conventional political wisdom was Trump's election victory, which defied prevailing assumptions of an increasingly Democratic population, and the role of money and organization in presidential choice.

Is the Party Really, Really Over?

This essay is a preliminary judgment as to how transformative the 2016 election is likely to be. A full answer must await the playing out of the Trump administration, and future presidential elections. But we can at least begin to ask the question. The first–indeed, the most prominent–issue posed by the 2016 election is the degree to which it was a transformative event, comparable to 1800, 1828, 1860, or 1936. To put it another way: does the 2016 election signify the emergence of a new process of choosing our presidents, in which independent players in the political culture–the media and popular culture, advocacy groups, PAC money–have superseded the venerable structure of organized parties, prominent politicians, and vested interest groups? Has the presidential selection system of the

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last half century undergone a fundamental alteration, the product of tectonic shifts in demography, culture, and above all the technology of political communication and discourse?

Or are the most conspicuous features of this election –the widespread unpopularity of the candidates; the plethora of major contenders (Bernie Sanders, Ted Cruz, above all Donald Trump) at odds with much of the political establishment. The spectacularly unexpected victory of Trump a passing epiphenomenon in an American party-presidential culture decisively set in its longtime framework?

This essay concludes that the bulk of evidence to date suggests incremental rather than fundamental change. The equivocations that have already appeared in Trump's speech, appointments, and actions, and above all the highly contingent nature of an election that could quite readily have had the opposite result, dictate at least a wait-and-see response to the question of 2016's place in our presidential history.

The Old and New Political Cultures

The traditional American parties were well adapted to the verbal-print world of the 19th and much of the 20th centuries, and to the demands of an industrializing, demographically exploding society. The parties flourished as complex mixes of seeming opposites. By uniting the Irish-Catholic-immigrant populations of the cities and the rural-Baptist Old South, the post-Civil War Democrats quickly regained a rough equality with the GOP. This was perpetuated by extensive organization run by state and local machines and bosses. The Bryan addition of free silver in 1896 gave the Democrats a claim on rural voters beyond the former Confederacy, though it delayed the party's appeal to urban-industrial workers.

The GOP adopted a strikingly similar posture of anodyne issue stands (tariff "protection," a relatively active national state), and extensive party organization run by bosses and machines.

This political system had its ups and downs. The slavery-secession crisis of the 1850s saw the collapse of the Whigs; the Progressive movement of the early twentieth century saw a new kind of President and in 1912 the first big challenge to the two-party system since 1860.

But the Great Depression, the New Deal, and World War Two set in motion the largest voting and public policy shifts since the Civil War. Blacks and educated elites left the party of Lincoln and entered into allegiance with the Democrats. Irish-Americans and White Southerners began a comparable decades-long hegira from their traditional Democratic identity.

The machinery of vote-gathering underwent comparably broad-gauged changes. Bosses and state and local machines declined under the erosive impact of post-World War Two suburbia and the lure of television. (From this perspective the rise of the Internet and the social networks are extensions of the primal transformative effect of television.)

The traditional party standbys of money, organization, and group political identity persisted, but in new formats. Ideology–in particular, social identity (gender, religious belief, family values)–shook up old ethnic, regional, and class political loyalties.

These new determinants of party most fully emerged during Obama's presidency. He was not only the first African-American president, but as much the (idealized) embodiment of the post-World War II Boomer Generation as John F. Kennedy was of the Greatest Generation that fought the war.

Kennedy's war record and personal appeal put paid to political anti-Catholicism, as Obama overcame racism, the deepest of all American prejudices. But Kennedy's election was steeped in the boss-machine, vote-getting, money-raising politics of the past. Obama's campaigns blazed new, post-machine paths in money-raising and vote-getting.

They made full and innovative use of the new Information Technology in getting out the vote of the minorities, women, and young people who constituted the Obama coalition. Hillary Clinton followed suit with what Walter Russell Mead has called her and Bill's "postmodern political machine."

The increasingly distinct Red-Blue, conservative-liberal political sorting out was another sea change in American politics. Liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats are increasingly rare, fit for the curatorial attention of the Smithsonian as relics of an earlier age.

The sense that we are deep into a new political culture is widely shared. Jonathan Rauch's Atlantic article "What's Ailing American Politics?" is typical of the genre. One of the major ills is what Rauch identified in the early 1990s as "demosclerosis." Gridlocked Congressional interests, an ever-expanding bureaucracy, an ever-larger regulatory state, and a growing sense of entitlement and rights, have made the conduct of government more difficult. Unwieldy legislative constructs–the 2009 Stimulus; Obamacare; Dodd-Frank; foreign policy resets of dubious efficacy involving Russia, China, Iran, Syria, climate change, trade–have a common quality of clunkiness and inefficacy.

Meanwhile the nation's most pressing problems–a sluggish economy; failed education; a popular culture that legitimizes the rejection of traditional views of marriage, family, religion; violent center cities and an increasingly dysfunctional White-Black underclass–are strikingly neglected by the chattering classes.

It is not surprising that there is a growing lack of confidence in the existing party system. Opinion polls show a marked decline of belief in opportunity and intergenerational progress, and in the capacity of government to conduct the nation's domestic business or to safeguard it from foreign threats.

Along with this has come a growing disbelief in the capacity of nongovernmental institutions–corporations and labor unions, the media and universities. The most conspicuous public concerns–over inequality, or over the role and size of government–are not bipolar, as was slavery or secession, but are the special concern of one or the other party. Democrats are more the party that cares about inequality, less so about government's reach. Republicans worry more about slow than unevenly distributed growth, and are more concerned about government's cost and intrusiveness than its social benefits.

Reform conservatives Marco Rubio and Paul Ryan dwell on the capacity of market-driven free enterprise to spur economic growth and jobs that can serve as an antidote to the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the highly and the minimally educated, stable and fractured families. Liberals Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren focus on tax-or regulation-driven government policies to break up the accumulations of the rich or large concentrations of capital. Yet both sides in the 2016 election were notably vague in their proposed solutions to these problems.

The Comparative Dimension

Another distinctive feature of the current political scene is the sense that what is happening in American politics echoes (and more than echoes) developments abroad: what analyst Sohrab Amari calls a "Worldwide Crisis" of "Illiberalism."

The comparative perspective is especially applicable to the case of Great Britain: an old tradition. American and British politics have often had notable instances of similarity. The Tory and Republican and the Liberal and Democratic parties of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had strong regional, demographic, and ideological resemblances. In our own time, there were notable resonances in the leadership of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, and between Tony Blair and Bill Clinton. The implosion of the Liberal Democrats, and the near-destruction of the Labor party in Scotland by the Scottish nationalists, was very like the erosion of moderate Republicans and Democrats in America.

Trump's victory evokes comparison with last spring's Brexit vote to leave the European Union. That was a Trumpian moment in British politics; the Trump

triumph was a Brexit moment in American politics. And the unexpectedly substantial candidacy of Old Leftie Bernie Sanders had a more successful analogue in the rise to Labor leadership of Old Leftie Jeremy Corbyn.

If, as is widely believed, less-educated, economically deprived, socially marginalized people were at the core of the Trump movement, then free-floating youth, unencumbered by the weight of normal life or awareness of what the twentieth century Socialist record actually had been, were conspicuous in the Sanders and the Corbyn Children's Crusades. While the Right has gotten more Right, the Left has gotten more Left.

2016: The Primaries

The endless, and endlessly precedent-breaking, primaries of 2016 were hardly the first to offer a plethora of candidates, some beyond the normal realm of presidential politics. Barry Goldwater in 1964 and George McGovern in 1972, and the bizarre Ross Perrot candidacy of 1992, were signs of a rising popular restlessness with the traditional ways of President-selecting. So was the hurly-burly of the GOP primary process in 2012. But the 2016 primaries were in a class by themselves.

The 2016 presidential campaign season began much like its 2012 predecessor. Once again the Republicans were awash with prospective candidates, though it was widely assumed that the eventual nominee would be Jeb Bush, George Herbert Walker Bush's son and George W. Bush's brother.

The Democrats seemed to be readying themselves for a replay of the first stage of the 2008 contest. Presumptive First Woman President Hilary Clinton, cruelly sidetracked by Obama's superior political strategy and the emotional appeal of the idea of the first Black President, would now meet her delayed rendezvous with destiny.

So 2016 seemed to be inexorably heading to a Bush-Clinton matchup: as past-defined, Establishment-driven, Buggins's-turn a model as could be imagined. Then the accumulated changes that had been reshaping American politics for half a century exploded.

Bush and Clinton were challenged–one decisively, the other more-than-expected. The fall of an early favorite was not new to primary politics. But the nature of the challenges–the outside-the-box showmanship of Donald Trump, the shadow socialism of Bernie Sanders–were hardly in the traditional American political grain. Notable, too, was the unpopularity of final candidates Trump and Clinton.

By the spring of 2016 both parties were experiencing surprisingly tenacious two-person conflicts over their presidential nomination. Once again an outsider

(this time a 74-year-old Jewish Vermont Senator rather than a 47-year-old African-American Illinois Senator) challenged the coronation of Queen Hillary. But Hillary did not have to relive, Groundhog Day-like, the humiliation of 2008. She benefited from the residual loyalties of the Obama coalition, and from the limits of Sanders' appeal to the core Democratic constituency.

The Republican primaries, too, became a two-person choice, comparably edgy in the less-than-conventional character of the contenders. Ted Cruz was, in his way, a GOP counterpart: a for-himself filibusterer, a conservative Sanders.

Hilary's triumph was the product of Insidership, the appeal of Diversity (first a Black, now a woman), and the devotion of Black voters to the designated inheritor of the Obama legacy. The Trump candidacy proved to be the end product of a process of lowest-common-denominator vulgarization that had been ever more the hallmark of Hollywood, TV ("reality" shows), and what passed for conversation and debate among the great unwashed legions of Twitterers, Facebookers, and the like.

But there was more to Trump than that. He saw himself as speaking for a "movement," and his ever-larger rallies and mounting primary triumphs suggested that there was something to that.

2016: The Election

When the election main event replaced the primary preliminary, the expectation was that things would settle down to the new normal for presidential elections: big money; big organization; big ideology. But it did not play out that way. Rather, Trump's campaign broke all the new rules of the political order. He notably under-spent the modern presidential election norm; he even more notably under-organized, relying instead on his energetic campaigning, frenetic texting, and the appeal of his message to the Middle Earth inhabitants of flyover country.

There has been much grasping at historical straws to put some perspective on this peculiar election: the over-20 percent performance of Ross Perot in 1992; the quixotic presidential quest of larger-than-life publisher William Randall Hearst in 1904; William Jennings Bryan's populism in 1896.

But in the wake of the result, Andrew Jackson's 1824 victory seems most resonant. This, too, was a revolution of less educated, socially marginal Whites against a Virginia-Massachusetts elite that had wielded the reins of presidential power from George Washington to John Quincy Adams. The Scots-Irish-Appalachia demographic strand at the core of the Jacksonian Revolution was conspicuous as well in the Trumpian upsurge. Thomas Jefferson struck an eerily

familiar-sounding note when he said that Jackson was "a dangerous man" who was "one of the most unfit men I know of" for the White House.

That Trump's election was something more than an historical echo is evident in the second apt analogy: the Brexit vote in the spring of 2016 to remove Great Britain from the European Community. The rhetoric that fed the vote, the smug self-confidence of the Remainers, and the social and regional makeup of the Brexiters closely resembled the Trumpian upheaval later in the year.

What ties the two analogies together, and adds to their explanatory power, is the common message of growing popular grievance in the face of rapid technological and social change.

Fire Bell or False Alarm?

In the wake of this extraordinary election, can we attempt an answer to the essay's initial question: Fire-Bell or False Alarm?

It will be some time before the professionals finish examining the statistical intestines of this contest. But it is possible to hazard a guesstimate as to the legacy of 2016: Was it a fire bell in the night, presaging a new era in American politics and government, kicked off by a technological and socio-cultural sea change unique in its scale and impact? Or was it a false alarm (or at most a one-alarmer), in which the old verities of American politics and government–the presence of two diverse parties, the endless tension between the big state, federalism, and civil society–will continue to work their way?

First, the case for the fire bell. As noted, Andrew Jackson embodied the political coming of age of the prototypical nineteenth century American: proudly, aggressively uncouth; fiercely parochial and nationalistic; scornful of the world's "losers" (Native Americans, African-American slaves); disdainful of the manners and mores of the well-born and/or well-educated. Trump is a 21st-century incarnation of that breed. He too battens on a pent-up hostility to regular ("establishment") politics and government. Hilary Clinton's dismissal of Trump's followers as "Deplorables" had a recognizable ancestor in the better sort's disregard for the Western backwoodsmen and Eastern laborers drawn to Jackson.

There have been two extended periods of presidential dominance by one political party: the Civil War-to-Great Depression stretch from 1861 to 1932, when with the exceptions of the two terms each of Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson, the GOP controlled the office; and the stretch from FDR in 1932 to Reagan in 1980, when with the exception of Dwight Eisenhower's and Richard Nixon's incumbencies, the Democrats were supreme.

Does the Trump election foretell a comparable Republican era of supremacy? After all, much of the groundwork is there: control of both houses of Congress, a large and growing GOP preponderance in state governorships and legislatures. And the early days of the Trump transition are full of signals, obvious to everyone but *The New York Times*, that he will not abide by some of his more outré primary and campaign pronouncements. It is well to remember that FDR in 1932 not only gave hints of the New Deal to come, but castigated the Hoover administration for too much federal spending and too much bureaucracy.

Here the fog of what has not yet happened sweeps in. Jackson so effectively channeled the resentments of his followers that his political revolution became the norm in American public life. The Whigs before long successfully adopted a variant of the Jacksonian political style with William Henry Harrison–Old Tippecanoe–in 1840. And two decades later in Abraham Lincoln the American idea of the leader as a product of the people rather than privilege reached its apogee.

Does the 2016 result suggest a replay? That great equalizer, contingency, was as much at play in this election as it has ever been. The closeness of the result (once again, as in 2000, the loser in the electoral college got the most votes), the ease with which any one of half a dozen key contested states might have gone the other way, even the uniquely off-putting personae of the candidates, detracts from the election's long-term significance for presidential politics. If its main message was popular discontent with the prevailing political class, there is no reason to think that the now-out-of-power Democrats will be less able to speak to that message than were the Whigs of the 1840s.

Since 1992, interparty rotation every two terms has been the norm. And there is little in the 2016 results to suggest that that is due to change. The popular distaste for politics-as-usual shows no sign of soon abating; nor is it clear that either party is on the cusp of a policy formulation that would dictate continued political success.

2016 sent a signal that the supposed basic building blocks of the new politics–big spending, big organization, pervasive media, big ideology–are not engraved in stone. Trump raised the prospect–chilling to the entrepreneurs who batten on the majority-manufacturing election industry–that larger advertising expenditures and massive, organized get-out-the-vote may not necessarily be the sine qua non of today's politics. This was not an election in which the Koch brothers, George Soros, and Tom Steyer figured large; the pundits and pollsters got egg all over their faces; the media did not contribute much to political discourse.

In retrospect, the media-popular culture's main impact was to help make Trump's a household name. The candidate showed how a professional confidence man skillfully using the internet and the media can foster a massive electoral base at relatively little cost. But then so did the Wizard of Oz.

It is true that the business of politics has undergone changes comparable to what has happened to agriculture, industry, and services. But that is hardly a new feature in American public life. Bosses and machines are all but gone; the Internet, social networks, and the current popular culture have widely changed our ways of doing politics. But the basic structure of two major parties, each restlessly seeking a combination of voters sufficient to win, remains. Indeed, rarely in our history have third parties, the traditional means of challenging politics as usual, been less consequential. Religion, region, economic and social standing, ethnicity: these remain the core coalition-building blocks, different combinations defining each of the parties.

Finally, it should be noted that the profound changes going on in American public and private life since the 1960s have had positive as well as negative consequences. Most benign is the growing incorporation into the mainstream of American life of groups defined by religious, racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identity. The election of the first Catholic and African-American presidents, and the first female candidate from a major party, once would have been deeply unsettling events. Now they have been taken in stride by most Americans.

This article was written on the cusp of the entry of the Trump administration. How he will govern, and the policy stands that he will take, are still up for grabs–as, indeed, is whether 2016 turns out to be a transformative election or a transient blip.

The tone of the transition period suggests that customary constraints on presidential boldness are still present. After all, it took those climactic events the founding of the Republic, slavery and secession, and the Great Depression and World War II, to underpin the presidencies of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Despite the hand-wringing of climate-change extremists and cultural declinists, there is no equivalent crisis confronting contemporary American society. Neither Russian nor Chinese foot-stamping approaches the Nazi or Communist défis. While Islamic terrorism is a continuing affliction, it is not a major national threat. And while there are passionate divisions in our popular, entertainment, media, and academic spheres, none approaches the racial or even (in the Great Depression) the class conflicts of the past.