The Rise of Trump

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Introduction

On June 16, 2015, Donald Trump descended the gilded Trump Tower escalator, strode to the podium, and announced his candidacy for president of the United States. His rambling speech stretched for nearly an hour. It was described as outrageous, incoherent, and xenophobic.\(^1\) Trump warned “our enemies are getting stronger and stronger... and we as a country are getting weaker.” He accused Mexico of purposely “sending people that have lots of problems” across our borders. And then he uttered the first words that set him far apart for all other major candidates running for office at the time: These people “are bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”\(^2\)

Trump’s allegation that Latino immigrants are drug dealers and rapists was not a slip of the tongue. It is an integral part of his worldview and message. In Trump’s us-versus-them narrative, “the other” is attacking us from without and weakening us from within as our leaders stand by clueless and ineffectual. He asks, “[h]ow stupid are our leaders... How stupid are these politicians to allow this to happen?” To Trump, the politicians are not only weak and incompetent; they are also “morally corrupt.” They are selling us “down the drain,” and they are “controlled fully by the lobbyists, by the donors, and by the special interests, fully.”

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Beset by external enemies, threatened by fifth column foes, and abandoned by an incompetent government and corrupt politicians, Trump proclaims that our country doesn’t win anymore, saying “[s]adly, the American dream is dead.” The only leader who can revive it is, of course, Trump. “But if I get elected president I will bring it back bigger and better and stronger than ever before, and we will make America great again.”

Politico, a leading news organization dedicated to covering politics in the United States and around the world, called Trump’s announcement “one of the more bizarre spectacles of the 2016 political season thus far,” and, foreshadowing the media circus that was to follow, “one of the most entertaining.” Political elites wrote off Trump’s presidential bid as a fool’s errand pursued by a narcissist. And the national media settled in to cover what was anticipated to be a short-lived, ultimately unsuccessful, but rating- and revenue-generating rerun of Celebrity Apprentice.

The day Donald Trump announced his campaign for president, three Republican Party insider favorites—former Governor Jeb Bush, Governor Scott Walker, and Senator Marco Rubio—led the Republican presidential field. What political scientists call the “invisible primary” appeared in full tilt with party insiders well in control of the nomination process. One month and two days later, Trump led Bush, Walker’s support was stagnant, and Rubio had faded. To the dismay, then alarm, and finally the horror of the Republican Party establish-

6. RealClearPolitics, “2016 Republican Presidential Nomination.” On July 16, 2016, Bush led the RCP poll-of-polls average with 15.5 percent followed by Trump at 15 percent. Walker’s support was at 9 percent, and Rubio’s support had fallen to just 6 percent. On July 18, 2016, Trump surpassed Bush.
ment, Trump led the RealClearPolitics Republican primary poll-of-polls average every day from July 18, 2015 onward.

While Trump’s ascendancy says something particular about his celebrity and showmanship, it says much more about the resonance of his rhetoric. Trump’s message struck what Tony Schwartz once called a “responsive chord” in America. Those who responded, and are still responding today, do not fit neatly into the simplistic, comforting, and condescending elite meme that Trump supporters are the “usual suspects”—working class, white, dispossessed males. Activated by Trump’s message and bluster, driven by threats real and imagined, and catalyzed by the media’s incessant repetition of both, a group responsive to a particular style of discourse—American authoritarians—rallied to Trump’s banner, providing him with a resilient base of support relatively impervious to attack and large enough, after years of partisan shifts in the electorate, to dominate a multi-candidate Republican primary contest.


12. Individuals with a disposition to authoritarianism demonstrate a fear of “the other” as well as a readiness to follow and obey strong leaders. They tend to see the world in black-and-white terms. They are by definition attitudinally inflexible and rigid. And once
Beginning with his June announcement speech, Trump's candidacy was an unapologetic clarion call to Americans disposed to authoritarianism. The shooting of Kathryn Steinle in San Francisco by an illegal immigrant on July 1, 2015 amplified Trump's warnings of the risk posed by “the others” in our society. It also provided Trump with a cudgel against Jeb Bush's “they come out of love” immigration policy and, to some Americans, further proof of the government's incompetence and inability to secure the borders and protect the country. Later that year, on November 13, terrorist attacks in Paris created an inflection point reinforcing Trump's casus belli against Muslims and increased the momentum of his campaign. And the December 2, 2015 San Bernardino terrorist shootings appeared to provide proof positive that Trump's warnings were fact, not fiction.

Amplified by 24/7 news coverage, the pervasive messaging of social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, and mass rally displays of power and unity, Trump's siren call reached—and was answered by—American authoritarians. To them, Trump's warnings are prophetic and manifest. “The other” is among us. “The other” is a danger. Political correctness is more than a misguided moral narrative; it is weakening our grasp of basic common sense, and increasingly undermines our safety and our prosperity. In a field of candidates beholden to establishment values only Trump is telling it like it is, and uniquely offers the skill and will to do what is necessary to protect Americans and make America great again.

Trump triumphed over sixteen rivals for the Republican nomination by espousing ascriptive, punitive policies on immigration and deportation, adopting a strongman tone and swagger, insulting “the others” in society, disregarding facts, and replacing consistency with unpredictability. He flaunted norms of civil political discourse by taunting opponents and the media, darkly warning of violence, cyber-bullying critics, issuing thinly-veiled threats, and inciting supporters at his mass rallies to violence. As a candidate, his deportment was...
unthinkable from the day he announced. Then, its shock value became entertainment as his message struck home with those Americans predisposed to authoritarianism, catalyzing a loyal base of support that was both unassailable and decisive.

But is Trump’s success in the Republican nominating process demonstrably different from what has occurred in America’s past? Does it represent simply part of the tug of war between illiberal and democratic American traditions that will be bested in the general election and relegated to the fringe? Or is Trump’s remarkable run, which surprised almost every pundit, commentator, and political insider in America and the world, something quite different? Is it a bellwether of change, a harbinger of a renewed competition between democracy and totalitarianism that mirrors the changes occurring across the world in China, Russia, Turkey, France, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Middle East? Is it the outcome of which historian Rogers Smith warned when he wrote, “the novelties and scientific doctrines of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era should alert us to the possibility that new intellectual systems and political forces defending racial and gender inequalities may yet gain increased power in our time”?

Trump’s success in the Republican primaries this year is demonstrably different from what has occurred in America’s political past, at least since Andrew Jackson was elected president. It is the rise of American authoritarianism—America’s Authoritarian Spring. And it is the product of the confluence of a number of long-term political and demographic trends together with unique factors that created the conditions for a Trump-like candidacy to flourish. In what follows, I dissect the different factors that provided fertile soil for Trumpism to take root. But I leave it up to you to determine if Trump’s rise is a time-bound anomaly or a foreshadowing of the future of American politics.

I begin by defining what I mean by the term “ascriptive” and tracing, quite briefly, some of the linkages between America’s ascriptive past and Trump’s present campaign. Next, I turn to defining authoritarianism and discuss how it has been studied, how it is measured, and the important role threat plays in its activation. I will then present

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the statistical evidence that Trump’s core supporters in the days lead­
ing up to the Iowa and New Hampshire contests were dispositionally
and behaviorally authoritarian. With this background in view, I will
turn to an examination of the unique conditions that made the 2016
primaries conducive to Trump’s candidacy. There have always been
Americans predisposed to authoritarians in the electorate; what made
the 2016 primaries different? I will conclude with a brief summary
and what I think is a pertinent question about the future: Which road
will America choose in November? Will we choose an ascriptive path,
the path of republicanism, or the path of liberalism? All three paths
are a part of our tradition. Which will prevail? The answer may be as
important to the United States—and to the world—as any election in
our recent history.

America’s Ascriptive Tradition and Donald Trump

Trump’s unvarnished us-versus-them rhetoric is not new to Ameri­
can. As Rogers Smith reminds us, the liberal and republican traditions
celebrated by Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz are just one part of the
story of American political development. There is another tradition—
an ascriptive tradition—that ascribes to specific groups, whether de­
dined in terms of race, ethnicity, creed, gender, sexual orientation, or
some other distinguishing characteristic—qualities that are seen to
justify unequal treatment. This tradition has existed throughout
America’s history, contending “that the nation’s political and econom­
ic structures should formally reflect natural and cultural inequalities,
even at the cost of violating doctrines of universal rights.” Racism,
sexism, and nativism are expressions of this tradition. So are some of
the darkest moments in American history—events that have raised

the ascriptive tradition as follows: “Adherents of what I term ascriptive Americanist
traditions believe true Americans are in some way ‘chosen’ by God, history, or nature to
possess superior moral and intellectual traits, often associated with race and gender. Hence
many Americanists believe that nonwhites and women should be governed as subjects of
second-class citizens, denied full market rights, and sometimes excluded from the nation
altogether.”