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A Break from the Past or A Link in the Chain?:
The Republican Party from Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump

by

Mitchell Evans

A thesis presented to the

Faculty of the Department of
Political Science and International Relations
Loyola Marymount University

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts in Political Science

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This thesis has been examined and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts in Political Science by:

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“A Break from the Past or A Link in the Chain?: The Republican Party from Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump”

ABSTRACT

The election of Donald Trump appeared to be a rejection of Republican orthodoxy. That someone who targeted the previous idols of Republican beliefs about free trade, protectionism, immigration, and welfare could have so completely won over the Republican voter base was notable. However, that Republican base had changed substantially since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Where white college graduates have traditionally voted more Republican, and those without a college degree were more Democratic in this era, this dynamic had switched by 2016. In this thesis, I ask two questions: First, how has the Republican Party changed its ideological and policy stances from Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump? Second, to what extent have changes in the electorate driven this change? This paper will be a longitudinal study of the changing trends of the Republican Party through its platforms and help expand on the scholarship of how changes in the electorate impact policy stances. Is there a future for the cult of personality of the Republican Party post-Donald Trump?

Dedication

To Mom and Dad, for whose endless support I will always be eternally grateful. You helped me edit late at night, gave advice, and always pushed me to do my best. This project could not have been possible without your assistance and support.

For Boomer, whose boundless reservoirs of happiness have brought me so much joy and whose endless stomach hopefully does not devour this thesis.

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CHAPTER 1

Where We Are

1.1 Introduction

The United States has had many politically polarizing, corrupt, or controversial presidents, yet few have been as self-interested and autocratic as the 45th President. The election of Donald Trump appeared to be a total rejection of Republican orthodoxy on many issues. That someone who seemed to target the previous idols of Republican beliefs about free trade, protectionism, immigration, and welfare could have so completely won over the Republican voter base was notable. His conduct before and during his presidency was spiteful, bullying, and occasionally racist. His embrace of executive unilateralism and his rhetoric around limits on his power demonstrated his full-throated wish to be a dictator. He was impeached twice and constantly embroiled in scandal, with all of these factors culminating in the events of January 6th, 2021. The Republican Party's fervent embrace of Donald Trump requires a serious

examination of how we reached this point.

Since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the Republican Party has shifted to the conservative right, shorning nearly all of what remained of its liberal and moderate flanks.¹ Reagan believed in low taxes, reduced welfare spending, free trade, and a militant interventionist foreign policy.² These remained the pillars of Republican ideology, though not without its detractors, until Donald Trump’s victory in 2016. Trump relied upon white, largely non-college-educated voters in the traditionally Democratic states of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania³ to overcome staggeringly high disapproval ratings⁴ and win the Electoral College by a combined 80,000 votes. Trump’s voter base was discontent with elites of both parties, globalization, minorities of all stripes, and the political system in general.⁵ The degree to which the changing electorate “gradually, then suddenly” reshaped the Republican Party is still being debated today. To understand how Trump was able to win both the presidential primary and general election in 2016, we must look at the changes in the Republican Party since 1980 to track its evolution and to contextualize Donald Trump among the Republican presidents and party leaders in the Reagan era onwards. This process will help determine which is-

1. Gerald F Seib, *We Should Have Seen it Coming: From Reagan to Trump—a Front-Row Seat to a Political Revolution* (Random House, 2020).

2. George R Goethals, *Realignment, Region, and Race: Presidential Leadership and Social Identity* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018).

3. Goethals.

4. Alan Abramowitz and Jennifer McCoy, “United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump’s America,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (2019): 137–156, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218811309>.

5. Abramowitz and McCoy.

sues and governing styles Trump followed that of his Republican predecessors and where he was a radical break.

My thesis seeks to address how the Republican Party has changed its ideological and policy stances from Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump, and to what extent has the change, if any, been driven by changes in the electorate? This paper will be a longitudinal study of the changing trends of the Republican Party and its platforms and help expand on the scholarship of how changes in the electorate impact policy stances. I will be using the Republican Party presidential platforms and tracking several common issues across Republican presidential administrations; I will also be engaging with secondary sources and relevant academic literature to further my arguments. Is there a future for the cult of personality of the Republican Party post-Donald Trump?

1.2 Literature Review

My literature review will cover four factors of American politics, beginning with a section on the literature regarding party politics in the United States. Party functionality is key to understanding how Donald Trump was able to win and take over the Republican Party. First, by looking at party strength in terms of the relationship between the President and his political party and the decline of the political influence of party elites over the base, then discussing the relationship between party elites and opinion formation. Next, I will move to the literature review on realignment and changes in the electorate.

This section will first detail some historical background on realignment and define the term and its relationship to American politics. Then, I will delve into the subsections related to realignment and race and some critiques of realignment literature. My third section will deal with populism with a brief overview of its impact on parties and voters. The fourth section will focus on the presidency, highlighting presidential authority and unilateralism.

1.2.1 Party Politics in America

Party Strength over Time

Party politics is a long-held American tradition, with the first American political parties arising almost immediately after the end of George Washington's presidency with the Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties. Political parties "afforded a way of organizing elections, legitimizing opposition, and guaranteeing peaceful transitions of power. Once in office, they helped elected officials work together and bridged some of the differences between and among government institutions."⁶ Ideally, they aim to "bring fractures and diverse groups together as a unified force, provide a necessary link between the distinct branches and levels of government, and provide continuity beyond terms of office. Parties also play an important role in encouraging active participation in politics."⁷ One conceptual model of party

6. John White and Matthew Kerbel, *Party On!: Political Parties from Hamilton and Jefferson to Trump* (Routledge, 2017).

7. White and Kerbel.

politics first developed during the 1950s by Ralph M. Goldman is to view them as divided into three sections: Party In Electorate, Party Organization, and Party In Government.⁸ Party In Electorate broadly refers to people who have a particular connection to a party, Party Organization refers to the formal machinery of a political party, and Party In Government refers to the candidates elected and have taken political office.⁹ This model has been critiqued based on being outdated and less relevant but can still serve a useful purpose theoretically.¹⁰ The goals of political parties vary depending on time and place (among other factors), but the two common conceptions are election-driven, policy-oriented, or both. Election-driven definitions focus primarily on the election-seeking itself; Joseph Schlesinger's definition is that "[a] political party is a group organized to gain control of government in the name of the group by winning election to public office."¹¹ More policy-driven definitions highlight the ideological goals of a party as "an organization that seeks to achieve political power by electing members to public office so that their political philosophies can be reflected in public policies."¹²

Essential political functions aside, the American people today find political parties unlikeable. In fact, political parties have become less popular with

8. Andrew Goldman, *The National Party Chairmen and Committees: Factionalism at the Top* (Routledge, 2019).

9. White and Kerbel, *Party On!: Political Parties from Hamilton and Jefferson to Trump*.

10. White and Kerbel.

11. Joseph A Schlesinger, *Political Parties and the Winning of Office* (University of Michigan Press, 1991).

12. Jay M Shafritz and Karin L Sandell, "The Dorsey Dictionary of American Government & Politics," *Newspaper Research Journal* 11, no. 1 (1990): 113.

“Voter dissatisfaction with both parties is high.”¹³ Famously, George Washington warned against political parties and partisanship during his farewell address at the end of his presidency, declaring them, “A fire not to be quenched, it demands a uniform vigilance to prevent its bursting into a flame, lest, instead of warming, it should consume.”¹⁴ Many Americans over the succeeding centuries agreed. These negative attitudes have waxed and waned over the decades, with “Americans often [dreaming] of freeing themselves from the two-party system. . . Such dreams are utopian. America has always had two major political coalitions, each winning about half the vote. It will always have two major political coalitions, each winning about half the vote.”¹⁵ This aspect of two-party dominance results from how political coalitions are optimized to be about half of the electorate to balance the ability to win elections while ensuring that each faction can advance its policy priorities.¹⁶ The design of our political system ensures that two parties will form, and the coalitional math supports the forming of two roughly co-equal blocs.

Relationship between President and Party

The presidency is the highest office in the land, as we all learn and know, yet with the support of the legislative branch, a substantial domestic footprint is possible to achieve. Therefore, having deep relationships with Congress

13. White and Kerbel, *Party On!: Political Parties from Hamilton and Jefferson to Trump*.

14. Burton Ira Kaufman and George Washington, “Washington’s Farewell Address: The View From the 20th Century,” (*No Title*), 1969,

15. Frank J DiStefano, *The Next Realignment: Why America’s Parties Are Crumbling and What Happens Next* (Prometheus Books, 2019).

16. Daniel J Galvin, “Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush,” 2009,

is necessary, A goal furthered by ties to the President's fellow party members in the legislature as an intermediary bond. Presidents strengthen their parties via party-building, which are "efforts undertaken by the president to endow the party organization with enhanced capacities."¹⁷ Party-building is a way of building support for the President by creating or expanding majorities and deepening relationships between the President and their party. Party-building can vary substantially depending on which party holds the presidency and whether they have control of both houses of Congress. Republican presidents, from Eisenhower to Bush, wanted "to build a new political majority, not to redeem the Republican Party per se. Yet in each case, they concluded that their formal party apparatus was the most efficient and broadly useful vehicle for their purposes."¹⁸ The formal party organization was to be an arm of the President expanding his influence across the country, expanding majorities, and creating or taking advantage of opportunities for agenda-setting. In contrast, due to more legislative control by the Democratic Party, Democratic presidents were more focused on coalition management, as "stable Democratic majorities prompted inconsistent and decidedly noninnovative actions on the part of Democratic presidents."¹⁹

This influence can be conceptualized in several different ways. A classic example is personal influence. As Richard Neustadt writes in *Presidential Power*,

17. DiStefano, *The Next Realignment: Why America's Parties Are Crumbling and What Happens Next*.

18. Galvin, "Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush."

19. Galvin.

where he defines this influence as “his personal capacity to influence the men who make up government.”²⁰ Neustadt posits that personal relationships are necessary due to the President’s lack of formal powers regarding the legislative process. Further work on this theory has emphasized “that presidents are highly limited in creating opportunities to influence Congress. Instead, the context in which presidents govern is generally fixed, and presidents can do little to fundamentally alter that context.”²¹ According to George Edwards, presidential authority is constrained and limited, dependent on taking advantage of legislative ‘windows’ and other opportunities. While these constraints are “congressional perceptions about whether the president has a mandate, whether the president’s party controls Congress, and the degree of polarization between the congressional parties”²² Presidential influence and accomplishments are more outside of his control than the public expects, as most, if not all, of these factors, are beyond a president’s control, determined by election results and perceptions of popularity versus hostility by the public and within Congress. Therefore, presidents do not have unilateral freedom to act but much smaller ‘windows,’ and “to understand presidential leadership...we should focus on how presidents exploit those opportunities that are presented, and at the same time we must be cognizant of how the con-

20. Richard E Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan* (Simon / Schuster, 1991).

21. Jeffrey E Cohen, *The President on Capitol Hill: A Theory of Institutional Influence* (Columbia University Press, 2019).

22. George C Edwards, *Predicting the Presidency: The Potential of Persuasive Leadership* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

text constrains the president.”²³ Another conceptual model is based on game theory, where “presidents [act] as strategic actors, with the context (political and otherwise) structuring their strategic decisions.”²⁴ Both of the latter theories emphasize other political figures and the constraints the President operates under

Decline of Party Elites

Since the democratization of the presidential nomination process, party elites have somewhat lost influence and control over their parties. Primary elections, where the party’s voters decide which candidate to support, reduce the influence of the formal party as “Party organizations struggle in primary elections because the very concept is antithetical to what parties do.”²⁵ Differences within “party in government can engage in internecine campaign warfare during primaries” and further, “no matter the intentions of the party organization, a well-motivated and mobilized electorate can overcome them.”²⁶ The primary system as we understand it today grew out of the 1970s reform movements as “Before the advent of primaries, when parties controlled their entire nomination process, there was no public scrutiny of candidate choice by parties. The parties would make their delegate allocation rules, delegates would show up to party conventions, and those delegates were free to make

23. Cohen, *The President on Capitol Hill: A Theory of Institutional Influence*.

24. Cohen.

25. Chapman Rackaway and Laurie L Rice, *American Political Parties Under Pressure: Strategic Adaptations for a Changing Electorate* (Springer, 2017).

26. Rackaway and Rice.

whatever decisions on candidates they desired. The voting public had little to no say in party nominations.”²⁷

This state of affairs could not last forever with the increasing democratic trends of the 1960s and after the highly chaotic and controversial “1968 Democratic convention...the public has strongly retrenched against the idea of parties having exclusive authority over nominations, especially for the presidency.”²⁸ Since then, the parties have changed their rules back and forth in a contest between more elite control versus voter power, with the trend favoring the latter.²⁹ Political elites still can and do send cues and signals to the electorate in various ways (endorsements being a prominent example). With the decline of traditional media and the rise of celebrity and political fundraising, the party insiders have fewer ways to control the nomination process.³⁰ However, compared to their early to mid-20th-century dominance, voters now drive the process much more substantially.

Party Elites and Opinion Formation

Political opinions are formed by various factors, including parents, schools, geography, religion, and more; the factor of most interest here is that of party elites. Party elites on both sides have become more ideologically aligned: a standard definition of elite polarization is the “high levels of ideological

27. Rackaway and Rice, *American Political Parties Under Pressure: Strategic Adaptations for a Changing Electorate*.

28. Rackaway and Rice.

29. Rackaway and Rice.

30. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die; What History Tells Us About Our Future, Crown* (Random House, New York, 2018).

distance between parties and high levels of homogeneity within parties.”³¹ Party elites are more ideologically aligned with their fellow partisans and against their opposites, which has impacted the electorate as a whole (see Bruckman et al. 2013 below)

A polarized environment causes this order of priority to apparently shift, such that a strengthened partisan identity causes party endorsements to carry the day. . . partisans in a polarized environment follow their party regardless of the type or strength of the argument the party makes (also see Slothuus and de Vreese 2010). Moreover, when individuals engage in strong partisan-motivated reasoning, they develop increased confidence in their opinions.³²

Elite polarization provides signals to the mass public on what their stances should be, especially issues that are highly salient at the moment, and “most voters have responded to these cues: party identification and voting choices are now closely connected to worldviews and policy positions.”³³ Voters have paid attention to these elite cues: “Perceptions of the parties depend on what party leaders do, and individuals are better able determine the parties’ ideological positions as the cues sent by party elites have become more distinct.”³⁴ The electorate responds to these cues by sorting themselves by party. A key result of “political elites become more polarized and perceptions

31. James N Druckman, Erik Peterson, and Rune Slothuus, “How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (2013): 57–79.

32. Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus.

33. Joshua N Zingher, “Response to Nicholas F. Jacobs and Sidney M. Milkis’s Review of Political Choice in a Polarized America: How Elite Polarization Shapes Mass Behavior,” *Perspectives on Politics* 21, no. 1 (2023): 321–321.

34. Joshua N Zingher and Michael E Flynn, “From On High: The Effect of Elite Polarization On Mass Attitudes and Behaviors, 1972–2012,” *British Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 1 (2018): 23–45.

of partisan gridlock become more prevalent, [is that] the degree to which one can expect meaningful political debate that transcends party lines may be decreasing.”³⁵ It is important to note, “Like other political elites, presidents since the 1980s have become much clearer in the signals they send to the electorate.”³⁶ Crucially, as “party elites have become more polarized, individuals have become better able to identify the party that best matches their own ideological positions, thereby contributing to polarization at the mass level.”³⁷

Political Polarization in the United States

Political polarization is no longer just an elite phenomenon but a broad-based mass one as well. Political polarization has filtered from elites to the general public in recent decades. As parties diverge and ideological conflict strengthens the vitriol present in our political sphere, “Political hostility is not simply a function of the amount of disagreement that exists over basic policy issues; it is a function of fewer overlapping group memberships and clearer distinctions between partisan in-groups and out-groups.”³⁸ This phenomenon of increased positivity towards the in-group and hostility towards the out-group is

35. Brian F Harrison, “Bully Partisan or Partisan Bully?: Partisanship, Elite Polarization, and US Presidential Communication,” *Social Science Quarterly* 97, no. 2 (2016): 418–438.

36. Zingher, “Response to Nicholas F. Jacobs and Sidney M. Milkis’s Review of Political Choice in a Polarized America: How Elite Polarization Shapes Mass Behavior.”

37. Zingher and Flynn, “From On High: The Effect of Elite Polarization On Mass Attitudes and Behaviors, 1972–2012.”

38. Zingher and Flynn.

known as affective polarization.³⁹ One study found, “Compared with the most salient social divide in American society—race—partisanship elicits more extreme evaluations and behavioral responses to ingroups and outgroups.”⁴⁰ This startling result shows the depth of polarization and the degree to which “party identification in the United States is more of an affective than instrumental or ideological bond.”⁴¹ However, other researchers have found more complex results on the ideological front.

An individual’s position on the social dimension was once a much weaker predictor of political behaviors and attitudes than it is today. In addition, an individual’s position on the economic dimension, which has always been an important predictor of behavior, has become even stronger. Americans have sorted on not one but both ideological dimensions. The parties are not only more clearly divided on both the elite and mass level, but they are divided on a wider set of issues. The increasing importance of the social dimension has not supplanted the importance of the economic dimension; rather, the predictive power of both dimensions is increasing.⁴²

Political polarization has been increasing for decades among both Republicans and Democrats; however, the Republican Party began the shift towards affective polarization first. With the rise of Newt Gingrich in the 1980s, who envisioned politics as a Hobbesian total war and riding affective polarization into power, the Republican Party shifted to a no-holds-barred “politics as

39. Shanto Iyengar and Sean J Westwood, “Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization,” *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 690–707.

40. Iyengar and Westwood.

41. Iyengar and Westwood.

42. Zingher and Flynn, “From On High: The Effect of Elite Polarization On Mass Attitudes and Behaviors, 1972–2012.”

warfare” strategy.⁴³

1.2.2 Realignment and Changes in the Electorate

Brief Overview of Realignment

Political parties are not eternal coalitions. Demographic support for each party varies across each election to some degree. Moreover, some elections have dramatic shifts, demographically, regionally, and ideologically, regarding what our political party system looks like. Realignments are a natural part of the political cycle, with a unique definition by Frank DiStefano, “Political realignments are part of a cycle built deep into the political structure of the American republic. They’re much like earthquakes that occur on known fault lines in the earth.”⁴⁴ Realignment literature was based upon the work of V.O. Key, who posited the presidential elections of 1896 and 1932 as realignment elections that led to substantial changes in the political realm.⁴⁵ Frank DiStefano further describes the party system as being stable for suddenly breaking down.

For long periods of time, political parties stay fundamentally the same, attracting similar coalitions and standing for a consistent set of ideas. Then they suddenly break, whether through one sharp “critical election” or a longer period of disruption, unleashing an unstable era of turbulence and change. New parties arise in the turmoil, attracting different coalitions and standing for different

43. Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die; What History Tells Us About Our Future*, Crown.

44. DiStefano, *The Next Realignment: Why America’s Parties Are Crumbling and What Happens Next*.

45. Valdimer O Key Jr, “A Theory of Critical Elections,” *The Journal of Politics* 17, no. 1 (1955): 3–18.

ideas. Most important, what defines these parties and the breaks between them is the rise of new issues and ideas.⁴⁶

Realignment is a pivotal process because it helps define the different eras and party systems and when parties change. While ‘critical realignment’ focuses on specific elections, ‘secular realignment’ is a more gradual process, defined as “Political elites make gradual changes in response to shifts in opinions on issues and preferences of the electorate. (Key 1959)”⁴⁷ This is similar to the concept of changes in the electorate.

[it] refers to alterations in the way individuals or groups of individuals engage or interact with parties. Work in this area describes why people change their party affiliations or what factors motivate their decisions to participate in political processes. On the other hand, work about changes in elite-level politics refers to the ways that parties and/or candidates construct or reshape their strategies or policy positions as they interact with the electorate and seek to build coalitions.⁴⁸

Changes in the electorate are slightly different, but both concepts contribute to the general understanding of how American politics shifts.

Realignment and Race

Race is one of the most fundamental parts of political politics, and many argue that it also plays a role in realignment and electorate change. George

46. DiStefano, *The Next Realignment: Why America's Parties Are Crumbling and What Happens Next*.

47. Keneshia Nicole Grant, “Relocation and Realignment: How the Great Migration Changed the Face of the Democratic Party” (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 2014).

48. Grant.

Goethals argues that a primary factor driving realignment is “racial dynamics. Furthermore, these racial dynamics are perpetuated largely by social identity concerns; that is, people’s need to have their political leaders validate themselves and the groups by which they define themselves.”⁴⁹ Under this framework, concern over racial dynamics that challenged social hierarchies or seemed to conflict with the in-group social identity led to realignment. Goethals notes explicitly that “Challenges or alternatives to a Southern social identity based on white superiority were fiercely resisted”⁵⁰ as an impetus behind several realignment elections. Keneshia Grant looks at how African-American migrants during the Great Migration affected the political landscape with

political actors—parties and politicians—responded to the changes in the electorate in a number of ways: (1) they took positions to attract support from Black voters; (2) they worked to mobilize Black voters during election campaigns; and (3) in some instances, when they were unwilling to meet Black demands, they worked to limit the power of Black voters by demobilizing the population.⁵¹

Ideology and common issues do still play a role in this process as “on the basis of Black voters’ reaction to the New Deal, Democrats understood that Black voters might be a group that was amenable to the new positions of the party—positions that increasingly advocated for the expansion of the federal

49. Goethals, *Realignment, Region, and Race: Presidential Leadership and Social Identity*.

50. Goethals.

51. Grant, “Relocation and Realignment: How the Great Migration Changed the Face of the Democratic Party.”

government's role in social welfare and civil rights issues.”⁵²

Critique of Realignment

The realignment literature is only sometimes accepted, with several critiques of the genre. Notably, David Mayhew describes the literature as “the rules are unclear and the past is uncharted.”⁵³ Specifically, that statistical analysis of the classic 19th and 20th-century presidential contests fails to distinguish the ‘realigning’ elections outside of 1932, with Mayhew remarking “that short-term, deviating electoral change is one thing; long-term, realigning change is another.”⁵⁴ Mayhew’s further use of previous quantitative research leads him to find that “To recapitulate, neither statistics nor stories bear out the canonical realignments calendar of 1860, 1896, and 1932. Something like faith seems to be needed to keep it in place.”⁵⁵ Mayhew finds the concept dismissive and reductive of voters’ agency, noting, “It is a Rip Van Winkle view of democracy that voters come awake only once a generation.”⁵⁶ Ultimately, he dismisses the theoretical framework(s) by declaring, “The ambitious version of the realignments perspective had its fruitful days, but it is too slippery, too binary, too apocalyptic, and it has come to be too much of a dead end.”⁵⁷

52. Grant.

53. David R Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments: A Critique of an American Genre* (Yale University Press, 2008).

54. Mayhew.

55. Mayhew.

56. Mayhew.

57. Mayhew.

1.2.3 Populism

Brief Overview of Populism Theory

When discussing populism, its variety across several contexts makes it challenging to define narrowly. A useful definition by Sheri Berman is below:

political movement or party emphasizing a Manichean, us-versus-them worldview in which the “us” refers to the “people,” defined often in ethnic or communal terms and seen as engaged in a zero-sum battle with “them,” defined most often as liberal elites, the establishment, and minorities and/or immigrants. Populists, moreover, claim to be democratic—indeed, much of their rhetoric is based on the idea that the existing political system has ignored, neglected, or outright worked against the interests of the people—but democracy is understood in majoritarian and illiberal terms⁵⁸

Causes of populism fall into two categories: demand-side and supply-side explanations. Demand-side focuses “on society or individuals in their analyses of Populism.”⁵⁹ These explanations would focus on economic concerns (‘economic anxiety’) or sociocultural worries such as “rising immigration, the decline of traditional values, and the mobilization of women and minority groups” or the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States.⁶⁰ While supply-side explanations are centered on “changes in the nature of democracy itself, in particular the growing inability or unwillingness of elites and institutions to supply responses to citizens’ demands... on the failures

58. Sheri Berman, “The Causes of Populism in the West,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 24 (2021): 71–88.

59. Berman.

60. Berman.

of governments, politicians, policy makers, parties, and other actors in their analyses of populism.”⁶¹ Supply-side theories would posit that the success of populism depends on the “decline of responsiveness and effectiveness of political institutions, which has made many citizens willing to vote for politicians and parties with antiestablishment, anti–status quo messages.”⁶² Populism has a long history in the United States, with notable examples from the 20th Century including “Huey Long’s Share the Wealth movement, Joe McCarthy’s witch-hunting communists, and George Wallace’s white backlash”⁶³, along with (arguably) Pat Buchanan.

Right-wing populism is often exclusionary and authoritarian, as these movements value “(1) the importance of security against risks of instability and disorder. . . (2) the value of group conformity to preserve conventional traditions and guard our way of life. . . and (3) the need for loyal obedience toward strong leaders who protect the group and its customs (‘I alone can fix it, ’”⁶⁴ This total deference to “Authoritarian values blended with populist rhetoric can be regarded as a dangerous combination fueling a cult of fear”⁶⁵, as fear of the other is required for such illiberal movements to thrive.

61. Berman.

62. Berman.

63. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

64. Norris and Inglehart.

65. Norris and Inglehart.

Impact of Populism on Political Parties

The impact of populism on the American political realm cannot be understated. Trump’s ascendancy to the highest office in the land marked the victory of the populist right faction of the Republican Party. John Heilemann, the managing editor of Bloomberg Politics, said in 2016, “This was the year of bipartisan, ecumenical, populist rage, and it was enough that the figure of Donald Trump was able to marshal that populist outrage and engineer a hostile takeover of the Republican Party.”⁶⁶ Trump’s embrace of the culture war helped “turned [politics] angry, zero-sum, moralistic, and destructive—while also discouraging the sorts of pragmatic and innovative reforms that renewing our parties would entail.”⁶⁷ This new front of political competition scrambled voters and pols alike with “some of those who consider themselves part of each party’s most committed “base” don’t actually believe fully in their party’s official ideology—and then seek to enforce their alternative version as the true one.”⁶⁸ Donald Trump’s remaking of the Republican Party in his image has left it confused about its policy stances, a fracturing coalition as Republicans try and square the circle of their current and former belief systems.

Due to this inability to square the circle, incoherence substitutes policy, leading to further outrage and solidifying Trump as the populist icon. As

66. Rackaway and Rice, *American Political Parties Under Pressure: Strategic Adaptations for a Changing Electorate*.

67. DiStefano, *The Next Realignment: Why America’s Parties Are Crumbling and What Happens Next*.

68. DiStefano.

William Howell and Terry Moe discuss, “The GOP under Trump has furthered a populist doom loop in which he disrupts government, alienating his supporters from the state even more and, in turn, causing them to double down in their support of populists.”⁶⁹ Incoherence, ineffectiveness, and outrage provide fertile ground for the success of populism, creating incentives for Trump and other populist figures to further these attitudes rather than solve them.

Populism, Partisanship, and Ideology

As mentioned previously, populism is more than a left-right issue or a party preference. It is a conceptual model of politics. Populism in its more conspiratorial and fringe versions can be dangerous as with “enough scale to disrupt politics and culture, it has the power to breed distrust in institutions, divorce people from the political order, and enhance susceptibilities to dangerous narratives and those who traffic in them.”⁷⁰ In fact, it may be that “normatively disconcerting attitudes we oftentimes attribute to partisan tribalism may be the work of another dimension of opinion,”⁷¹ that of populism and anti-establishment views. Uscinski et al.’s study found that

Candidates who employ anti-establishment rhetoric, be it through conspiracy theories or populist appeals, may be able to activate peo-

69. William G Howell and Terry M Moe, “Response to Daniel W. Drezner’s Review of Presidents, Populism, and the Crisis of Democracy,” *Perspectives on Politics* 19, no. 2 (2021): 591–591.

70. Joseph E Uscinski et al., “American Politics in Two Dimensions: Partisan and Ideological Identities Versus Anti-Establishment Orientations,” *American Journal of Political Science* 65, no. 4 (2021): 877–895.

71. Uscinski et al.

ple’s anti-establishment orientations and connect them to salient political choices (e.g., voting), effectively pulling the once orthogonal anti-establishment dimension in the direction of their end of the left-right dimension. Anti-establishment orientations may not be strong enough to override left-right orientations when it comes to salient, partisan presidential candidates for most people. However, they may reduce the impact of left-right considerations by presenting a new framework.⁷²

Another of their findings was that “even when it comes to misinformation and conspiracy theories with a salient partisan or ideological component, some combination of left-right and anti-establishment motivations underwrite belief; these are not merely the product of partisan-motivated reasoning.”⁷³ Populism is not entirely separate from or a part of the left-right axis, with its influence on voters’ beliefs and partisanship being a highly relevant topic. The interaction between the more traditional left-right dichotomy and populist attitudes is a crucial dynamic in the modern Republican Party and Donald Trump.

This may explain some of the drastic shifts among white voters in the 2016 presidential election. In 2016, white voters with college degrees bolted away from Donald Trump, while white voters without college degrees flocked toward him.

Among white college graduates, according to the national exit poll, Trump’s three-point margin was the smallest in decades, and far

72. Uscinski et al., “American Politics in Two Dimensions: Partisan and Ideological Identities Versus Anti-Establishment Orientations.”

73. Uscinski et al.

smaller than Mitt Romney's 14-point margin in 2012. Among white voters without college degrees, however, Trump's 37-point margin was much greater than Romney's already impressive 25-point margin. Related to the education divide, the exit polls showed that, among white voters, the class divide was also much larger than the gender divide⁷⁴

White working-class voters had long been drifting away from the Democratic Party, and this cements that change for the foreseeable future. Yet the flight of white college graduates can be explained by their dislike of Trump's populist, derogatory appeal, which so endeared him to his diehard supporters.

1.2.4 Presidency

Presidential Authority and Unilateralism

Presidential authority refers to the powers and capabilities of the President, such as their ability to issue executive orders and their control of the administrative state. Presidential use of executive power is a tool to bypass Congress. However, their use depends "on both the ideological alignment of the president and Congress as well as changes in legislative capacity to limit executive action through statutory discretion and oversight."⁷⁵ This framework is not static across Presidential administrations or even during them as factors change, like "When congressional capacity is low, the President can more effectively circumvent a hostile Congress through unilateral action.

74. Abramowitz and McCoy, "United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump's America."

75. Alexander Bolton and Sharece Thrower, "Legislative Capacity and Executive Unilateralism," *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 3 (2016): 649–663.

In these times, he issues more executive orders when his preferences diverge from Congress.”⁷⁶ Over the past decade or so, though, there has been an “expansion of executive power and the decline in legislative authority have been fueled by complementary forces of increased congressional polarization and decreased legislative capacity.”⁷⁷ Legislative capacity is simply the extent to which Congress can pass legislation and actively engage in the balance of powers, and crucially with “recent conditions of divided government and highly competitive, approximate parity in the strength of parties at the national level, have led to the expansion of executive authority at the expense of a diminished legislature.”⁷⁸ When presidents want to accomplish their agenda, unilateral action is an attractive route, especially when faced with a hostile, incapable Congress. Understanding the concepts of presidential power and executive style helps better ground the reader regarding how presidents approach their power and in what ways this understanding has broadened in recent Republican administrations.”

1.2.5 Gaps

When looking at the election of Donald Trump, gaining a brief understanding of how political parties, party elites, realignment and changes in the electorate, populism, and expanding presidential authority work is crucial. How-

76. Bolton and Thrower, “Legislative Capacity and Executive Unilateralism.”

77. Edward G Carmines and Matthew Fowler, “The Temptation of Executive Authority: How Increased Polarization and the Decline in Legislative Capacity Have Contributed to the Expansion of Presidential Power,” *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 24, no. 2 (2017): 369–398.

78. Carmines and Fowler.

ever, some gaps remain, including how party ideologies change. As “Gerring wasn’t sure himself what accounted for the development of a party’s ideology or what made ideologies suddenly change after long eras of stability.”⁷⁹ Party ideologies, as we have seen, are undergoing a period of intense change. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to say that Trump discarded all of previous Republican thought. Analyzing these dynamics as a whole is necessary to fit Donald Trump into a larger context of Republican presidents, their platforms, policy administration, and presidential conduct. This would give better context into the changes of party ideology and what they even mean in the current American political system.

1.3 Research Question and Hypothesis

My research question is: how has the Republican Party, on an ideological and policy basis, changed from Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump, and to what degree, if any, have changes in the electorate played in this process?

I hypothesize that Donald Trump did mark a significant break from the Republican Party on social and economic issues, which he attempted to execute through his expansion of executive power; these developments were furthered by the changes in the electorate over the preceding decades since the victory of Ronald Reagan, which supported the Republican Party’s populist and authoritarian elements, resulting in Donald Trump’s victory in 2016

79. John Gerring, *Party Ideologies in America, 1828-1996* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

and subsequent dominance over the Republican Party.

1.4 Methods

My primary data source will be the Republican Party presidential platforms from 1980 onwards. Party platforms are the official statements of what parties and presidential candidates want to communicate to the public, what they view as important, and how to resolve the salient issues of the day. They serve as a statement of the candidate's ideals and goals while also attempting to unify the party around said beliefs. Tracking the party platforms will allow me to chart the Republican Party's evolution and more accurately fit Donald Trump's platform and policy into that of his predecessors.

Ronald Reagan's victory in 1980 demonstrated the success of the conservative wing of the Republican Party on the federal level over its more moderate counterparts. By selecting this timeframe from 1980 onwards, I can focus on the era when conservatism firmly took the reins of the modern Republican party and see the differences within the conservative movement that has dominated the party.

I will also be using secondary sources and other relevant academic literature to provide more context and information about the policy administration of key issues across Republican presidential administrations within the relevant timeframe, with a focus on executive unilateralism and authority. This is a necessary component to provide a fuller view of where the Republican

Party is going in terms of its views and practices about policy and executive power. Further, by integrating other primary and secondary sources, this study can help contextualize the ways that Donald Trump is a uniquely damaging, anti-democratic, and populist figure and also where he fits into more of a historical pattern of executive unilateralism and right-wing authoritarianism.

1.5 Contributions

This study aims to provide more detail regarding the specific issues that Donald Trump differed from his recent Republican predecessors, answering whether it was just in style, scope, or policy grounds. By tracking salient social and economic issues throughout this period's presidential platforms and administrations, I aim to show where Donald Trump fits in. This is important as it can serve as an indication of whether a Donald Trump-esque figure was inevitable or not. Did the Republican Party already build the road for right-wing authoritarian populism to take over the party in the 21st Century? The party platforms may be able to demonstrate certain warning signs that the party was about to fall to demagoguery.

Secondly, trying to gain a greater understanding of how the electorate played a role in the process of the party platforms and the nature of the party itself, changing. Donald Trump's populist appeal did not spring out of the ground from nowhere; previous attempts by Ron Paul in 2012, Sarah

Palin in 2008, and Pat Buchanan during the 1990s commanded significant sway, yet none were able to accomplish the final goal of victory in the party's presidential primary. How had the party changed in the intervening years, and how had such right-wing populism become more attractive?

Right-wing authoritarianist populism is not going away from the current iteration of the Republican Party anytime soon. Gaining a greater understanding of how party ideologies change and how such populism interacts with the party and the electorate can help give insight into where the Republican Party is today and where it might be in a post-Donald Trump future.

CHAPTER 2

How We Got Here: Change in Party Platforms and Electorates Over Time

2.1 Overview

The United States has had many politically polarizing, corrupt, or controversial presidents, yet few have been as self-interested and autocratic as the 45th President. The election of Donald Trump appeared to be a total rejection of Republican orthodoxy on many issues. That someone who seemed to target the previous idols of Republican beliefs about free trade, protectionism, immigration, and welfare could have so completely won over the Republican voter base was notable. His conduct before and during his presidency was spiteful, bullying, and occasionally racist. His embrace of executive unilateralism and his rhetoric around limits on his power demonstrated his full-throated wish to be a dictator. He was impeached twice and constantly embroiled in scandal, with all of these factors culminating in the events of January 6th, 2021.

The Republican Party's fervent embrace of Donald Trump requires a serious examination of how we reached this point.

Since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the Republican Party has shifted to the conservative right, shorning nearly all of what remained of its liberal and moderate flanks.⁸⁰ Reagan believed in low taxes, reduced welfare spending, free trade, and a militant interventionist foreign policy.⁸¹ These remained the pillars of Republican ideology, though not without its detractors, until Donald Trump's victory in 2016. Trump relied upon white, largely non-college-educated voters in the traditionally Democratic states of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania⁸² to overcome staggeringly high disapproval ratings⁸³ and win the Electoral College by a combined 80,000 votes. Trump's voter base was discontent with elites of both parties, globalization, minorities of all stripes, and the political system in general.⁸⁴ The degree to which the changing electorate "gradually, then suddenly" reshaped the Republican Party is still being debated today. To understand how Trump was able to win both the presidential primary and general election in 2016, we must look at the changes in the Republican Party since 1980 to track its evolution and to contextualize Donald Trump among the Republican presidents and party leaders in the Reagan era onwards. This process will help determine which is-

80. Seib, *We Should Have Seen it Coming: From Reagan to Trump—a Front-Row Seat to a Political Revolution*.

81. Goethals, *Realignment, Region, and Race: Presidential Leadership and Social Identity*.

82. Goethals.

83. Abramowitz and McCoy, "United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump's America."

84. Abramowitz and McCoy.

sues and governing styles Trump followed that of his Republican predecessors and where he was a radical break.

2.2 Ronald Reagan

The 1980 Platform

Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential platform was hopeful and uplifting. It focused on highlighting the perceived weaknesses and inadequacies of the Carter administration, proclaiming that "America is adrift. Our country moves agonizingly, aimlessly, almost helplessly into one of the most dangerous and disorderly periods in history."⁸⁵ The country was "continuing downward spiral in economic vitality and international influence."⁸⁶ The language evokes despair and bleakness, yet quickly, the tone shifts to a much more positive, unifying rhetorical vision. Now, the Republican Party seeks to "affirm our deep commitment to the fulfillment of the hopes and aspirations of all Americans—blacks and whites, women and men, the young and old, rural and urban,"⁸⁷ that while the Democratic Party could not fulfill these latent dreams, the Republicans would, on a broad national level.

Economic policy prescriptions are presented as providing more choices, liberty, and freedom. Taxes were to be cut, and raises were to be slowed as

85. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, "Republican Party Platforms, Republican Party Platform of 1980," The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara (hosted), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273420>.

86. Peters and Woolley.

87. Peters and Woolley.

they “generate increases in economic growth, output, and income, which will ultimately generate increased revenues. The greater justification for these cuts, however, lies in the right of individuals to keep and use the money they earn.”⁸⁸ According to the theory, people are better qualified to spend their own money than the government. These policies were libertarian-esque in nature, marking a shift away from Ford and Nixon’s more moderate Keynesian policies in favor of the monetarist policies supported by Milton Friedman and other Austrian economists from the Chicago School of Economics.

Welfare was another significant focus of the economic section of the platform with specific fixes. The platform promised to clean up the “degrading, dehumanizing, wasteful, overlapping, and inefficient programs that invite waste and fraud but inadequately assist the needy poor.”⁸⁹ This was to be accomplished by fixing the ‘poverty trap’ of welfare assistance being greater than earned income, reducing government spending, and reforming welfare programs to a smaller, localized program with less federal oversight was the goal, firmly in line with the idea of state control and weakening the federal bureaucracy. The federal government should stay out of the way of the states, which should be free to design their programs.

The platform sections on jobs and international trade firmly promote economic growth as the key economic policy goal of the Republican Party, particularly export-led growth that would help revitalize the domestic economy.

88. Peters and Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, Republican Party Platform of 1980.”

89. Peters and Woolley.

The platform acknowledges some of the economic displacement of foreign trade: “Much of this problem is a result of the present Administration’s inability to negotiate foreign trade agreements which do not jeopardize American jobs.”⁹⁰ Foreign trade may have some adverse effects, but that was due to the Carter administration’s inability or unwillingness to prioritize American workers’ interests to eliminate foreign trade barriers. Protectionism is a threat “as protectionist tariffs and quotas are detrimental to our economic well-being. . . . The Republican Party will consider appropriate measures necessary to restore equal and fair competition between ourselves and our trading partners.”⁹¹ Free trade was a nearly unparalleled good, yet the Democrats could not remove protectionist barriers, a significant barrier to economic revitalization. Therefore, a Republican president would hold them accountable, ensuring that foreign countries would have to truly open their markets or face unspecified retaliatory actions. Protectionism was the obstacle to be overcome and not something that the United States should be engaging in, save only as a last resort.

America’s position had never been so precarious since the interwar period, evoking memories of Pearl Harbor, World War II, and the constant Soviet presence as an encroaching hegemonic threat that required substantial military investment to counter. The platform called for “sustained defense expenditure sufficient to close the gap with the Soviets, and ultimately reach the

90. Peters and Woolley.

91. Peters and Woolley.

position of military superiority.”⁹² Military spending had to rise drastically in order to fund the new programs and armaments outlined in the section. The United States would center our foreign policy goals around “pursue positive non-military means to roll back the growth of communism. . . help our allies and other non-Communist countries defend themselves against Communist aggression.”⁹³ Foreign policy was to be militarist and realist, skeptical of the international realm and arms control negotiations between the Soviet Union and the United States. To do otherwise, our varied enemies, but especially the Soviets, would continue to take advantage of us, leaving us feeble and unable to maintain a credible deterrence, either conventional or nuclear.

The platform is hopeful but realistic. It seeks to promote people’s economic freedom from government, reduce taxation and spending, and stake a more militant role in the global arena.

The 1984 Platform

In 1984, Ronald Reagan was the incumbent President, whereas in 1980, he could run as an oppositional candidate; now, he had to run on his record in office. The preamble consciously echos the 1980 platform: “The Republican Party looks at our people and sees a new dawn of the American spirit.”⁹⁴ As before, the optimistic view of the nation pervades the entire party plat-

92. Peters and Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, Republican Party Platform of 1980.”

93. Peters and Woolley.

94. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, Republican Party Platform of 1984,” The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara (hosted), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273427>.

form. Its thesis was, “From freedom comes opportunity; from opportunity comes growth; from growth comes progress.”⁹⁵ Economically, there are a few changes: “Not every problem cries out for a federal solution. We must help the poor escape poverty by building an economy which creates more jobs, the greatest poverty fighter of them all.”⁹⁶ The remaining economic sections touched on where the Reagan administration had succeeded on inflation, tax cuts, and indexing the tax code as noted policy victories. While pointing out that the Democratic Congress had not cut spending to the level Reagan and other Republicans wanted, insisting that balanced budgets must come from spending cuts, not taxation. The platform decries the relatively weak hand of the presidency in budget negotiations, supporting a line-item veto to empower the executive.⁹⁷ The “welfare industry” had been fought and inflation defeated, allowing economic growth to lift people out of poverty and lessening government dependence⁹⁸. The platform calls for revisions to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade to expand market access for goods and reduce government interventions in markets: the platform also calls for “reviewing trade with totalitarian regimes.”⁹⁹ Trade could be used against American interests either economically or in terms of geopolitics.

Foreign policy and international relations gained more details around efforts to resist the Soviet Union, while defense spending was not as central

95. Peters and Woolley.

96. Peters and Woolley.

97. Peters and Woolley.

98. Peters and Woolley.

99. Peters and Woolley.

to the platform. The central goal of Reagan's foreign policy was to "maintain our freedom in a peaceful international environment in which the United States and our allies and friends are secure against military threats."¹⁰⁰ Communist states or movements in countries like the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Angola, and Grenada, among others. Again, the stance around direct talks with the Soviets signaled a hardline position, stating that "any future agreement with the Soviets must require full compliance, be fully verifiable, and contain suitable sanctions for non-compliance."¹⁰¹ This was not to negate future diplomacy but to eke out where Reagan stood rhetorically. Indeed, precursors to Reagan's proposals on nuclear weapons are in the platform with the administration "seek[ing] substantial reductions in nuclear weapons, rather than merely freezing nuclear weapons at their present dangerous level."¹⁰² The section is brief but noteworthy in that diplomacy, even around nuclear weapons, was not foreclosed.

The platform is similar to its predecessor, with some mild changes, especially around detailing administration victories and a more concrete global foreign policy aimed at countering perceived Soviet influence.

100. Peters and Woolley, "Republican Party Platforms, Republican Party Platform of 1984."

101. Peters and Woolley.

102. Peters and Woolley.

2.3 George H.W. Bush

The 1988 Platform

As George H.W. Bush wished to ascend from Vice President to President, the 1988 platform is often celebratory in tone. It seeks to remind Americans that the economic recovery since the early 1980s was thanks to the Reagan administration getting the federal government out of the way. The platform promised, “people direct government and government empowers people to solve their own problems and to have more choices in their lives... military strength, diplomatic resoluteness, and firm leadership are necessary to keep our country and our allies free.”¹⁰³ Economically, the rhetoric strictly adhered to the platforms of the Reagan administration: no new taxes, wealth creation, entrepreneurship, and reduced welfare spending. Support for free trade is even greater if possible, “We will not accept the loss of American jobs to nationalized, subsidized, protected foreign industries and will continue to negotiate assertively the destruction of trade barriers.”¹⁰⁴ The new Bush administration would continue to remove trade barriers aggressively, improve market access for American goods, and reduce unfair trade practices in the global system. Bush also ardently argues against American protectionism, proclaiming that “protectionism, an economic narcotic that saps the life out

103. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, Republican Party Platform of 1988,” The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara (hosted), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273433>.

104. Peters and Woolley.

of commerce, closes foreign markets to U.S. producers and growers, and costs American consumers billions of dollars.”¹⁰⁵

The platform staunchly supports internationalism from a more realistic perspective. Military might and strength are referenced throughout to defend and promote freedom and democracy. Bush would center his foreign policy around “defending the United States of America and its people; protecting America’s vital national interests abroad; and fostering peace, stability and security throughout the world through democratic self-determination and economic prosperity.”¹⁰⁶ Our foreign policy must defend ourselves and our interests and promote economic and democratic freedom. Diplomacy with the Soviet Union is necessary and encouraged, but “dialogue and engagement can be successful only if undertaken from a position of strength.”¹⁰⁷ The Republican party knows how the world works, unlike the naive fantasies of liberals, is the subtext of this passage. It aligns with the prior platforms during the Reagan era of 1980 and 1984.

The 1992 Platform

President George H.W. Bush sought his own re-election; the world was changing drastically with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and subsequent liberation, to name two key events. The platform portrays the collapse of the Soviet Union as the grand defeat of not just

105. Peters and Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, Republican Party Platform of 1988.”

106. Peters and Woolley.

107. Peters and Woolley.

communism but also the Democratic ideals of a stronger federal government as they “revise history to rationalize a return to bigger government, higher taxes, and moral relativism.”¹⁰⁸ In contrast, “Presidents Reagan and Bush turned our Nation away from the path of over-taxation, hyper-regulation, and mega-government... We cut taxes, reduced red tape.”¹⁰⁹ The Republican party continued to stand against the Democratic standards of higher taxation, regulation, or supporting the mess of welfare.¹¹⁰ The familiar bromides on economic issues continued to emphasize entrepreneurship, small business, and freedom of and from government, attacking the Democratic party’s tax-and-spend regulatory big government nature.

Regarding free trade, the Bush administration talks about its successes in promoting economic liberalization worldwide, as export-led growth supported significant numbers of jobs and industries. The platform declares, “We are tough free traders, battling to sweep away barriers to our exports,”¹¹¹ The reduction of global trade barriers was akin to an evangelical mission: to reduce market barriers for American goods wherever they might be and eliminate subsidies to the greatest extent possible. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was a critical success. In conjunction with the goal of economic freedom, “U.S. aid, whether bilateral or through international or-

108. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, Republican Party Platform of 1992,” The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara (hosted), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273439>.

109. Peters and Woolley.

110. Peters and Woolley.

111. Peters and Woolley.

ganizations, should promote market reforms, limit regulation, and encourage free trade.”¹¹² These were the economic ideals of the administration domestically and internationally.

On defense and foreign policy, the platform is nigh laudatory towards President Bush for the end of the Soviet Union finishing the “crusade of a half-century, to champion freedom and civilization against the dark night of totalitarianism, is now victorious.”¹¹³ The defeat of the evil empire, as Reagan called it, was one of the greatest foreign policy successes of the post-World War II order. Bush also warned of the dangers of isolationism, saying, “History teaches that when the United States shrinks from the world, we hasten the emergence of new dangers.”¹¹⁴ In this vein of cautious optimism on the international scene, the platform called for the “difficult task of reducing both the size and cost of defense without letting down America’s guard.”¹¹⁵ For the first time since the covered time frame, the Republican platform formally called for reductions to the defense budget. The world was a different place, and the party changed its stance on defense spending to some extent. Still, the era of Ronald Reagan to George H.W. Bush showed far more continuity on the selected issues than change; the details may have depended on the year, but the larger ideological project remained intact and seemingly poised to dominate the Republican party for years to come.

112. **1992.**

113. Peters and Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, Republican Party Platform of 1992.”

114. Peters and Woolley.

115. Peters and Woolley.

2.4 Robert Dole

The 1996 Platform

In 1992, former Arkansas governor Bill Clinton defeated George H.W. Bush, and the Republican presidential primary was open for the second time since Ronald Reagan's victory in 1980. In 1996, Senator Robert Dole of Kansas, a vice presidential candidate in 1976 with President Gerold Ford and then-serving as leader of the Republican Senate Caucus, was the victor. According to this platform, the Clinton administration was a disaster, socially, morally, and economically, and a new Republican administration put the United States back on the right path.

Economically, the emphasis is on “American enterprise and creativity will carry it, free from unnecessary taxes, regulation, and litigation”¹¹⁶, which is very much in line with Reagan's ideals. With free trade, alongside the calls for improved market access and expansion of export-led growth, there is a more explicit call for “vigorous enforcement of the trade agreements we already have on the books. . . , promote market reforms, limit regulation, and encourage free trade. . . Republicans will not allow the World Trade Organization to undermine United States sovereignty.”¹¹⁷ Now, this enforcement was still in the context of promoting free trade, and the section is clear on that,

116. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, Republican Party Platform of 1996,” The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara (hosted), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273441>.

117. Peters and Woolley.

but it is a slight shift in expanding on the levers to stop unfair trade practices and dismissing the role of the World Trade Organization.

Regarding foreign policy, it contrasts the hopeful, optimistic tone of prior sections and platforms with a more pessimistic outlook. The platform declared that the “international situation - and our country’s security against the purveyors of evil - has worsened over the last three and a half years.”¹¹⁸ The Clinton administration had a “rudderless foreign policy”¹¹⁹, and was incapable of promoting strength, freedom, and democracy on the international scene¹²⁰. This section recalls the negativity of the Carter administration’s foreign policy, continuing a line of attack that Democrats are ineffective, weak, and not able to promote America’s international goals. Indeed, the comparison between Carter and Clinton is even more apparent regarding defense, as Clinton’s “amateur approach to military matters and dramatic reductions in defense spending... Not since the “Hollow Army” days of Jimmy Carter.”¹²¹ This marks a change from the 1992 platform and a return to the calls for increased defense spending and new weapon programs, which is hard to accomplish while promoting the Balanced Budget Amendment. The sections on foreign policy and defense did change from 1992. However, they were still broadly in line with Reagan’s policies. They were primarily a function of being out of power, like in 1980, and portraying the party as the fix to the

118. Peters and Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, Republican Party Platform of 1996.”

119. Peters and Woolley.

120. Peters and Woolley.

121. Peters and Woolley.

Democratic-inflicted woes.

2.5 George W. Bush

The 2000 Platform

George W. Bush, son of George H.W. Bush and Governor of Texas, won the 2000 Republican presidential nomination to take on Vice President Al Gore. The party had not won a presidential election since his father in 1988, twelve years prior. This platform emphasizes the choice, opportunity, optimism, and new vision the Republican party offers the American people after eight years of the Clinton presidency. Economically, America was prosperous thanks to the Republican government of Presidents Reagan and H.W. Bush, yet the old target of “over-taxation of the American people. The weak link in the chain of prosperity is the tax system.”¹²² Taxati sapped the country’s economic health, preventing economic growth, opportunity, and progress as the phrase went, so it needed to be cut down to reduce government size. Reforms to Social Security were highlighted to the greatest extent since 1980¹²³, promoting individual saving accounts and economic choice and ruling out tax increases to continue funding the program. The welfare reform section praises previous efforts to reduce welfare dependence and directs future efforts to support faith-based providers.

122. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, 2000 Republican Party Platform,” The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara (hosted), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273446>.

123. Peters and Woolley.

Free trade remained central to the American economy and the Republican vision of export-led growth. The platform calls for expanding WTO negotiations, presidential negotiation authority, and market access for goods and services. Protectionism abroad would not be tolerated, as George W. Bush would pursue “vigorous enforcement of U.S. trade laws against unfair competition.”¹²⁴ Protectionism at home would be opposed as well, noting how Republicans had to push for free trade initiatives and how Clinton “turned to Republican leadership in the Congress to enact permanent normal trade relations with China.”¹²⁵

Foreign policy and defense spending are in line with previous claims, critiquing Clinton and Democrats for being leaderless, ineffective, and too weak on the international stage. The platform proclaims that “the [Clinton] administration has squandered the opportunity granted to the United States by the courage and sacrifice of previous generations.”¹²⁶ Democrats had only doubled down on their mistakes since the Carter years, weakening our standing and military strength; this neglect requires “spending more and investing wisely to transform our military into a true twenty-first century force.”¹²⁷

The platform thematically focuses more attention on democratic ideals of liberty and freedom as goals to aspire to both at home and abroad. We see changes regarding health care, and new attention is being paid to Social

124. Peters and Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, 2000 Republican Party Platform.”

125. Peters and Woolley.

126. Peters and Woolley.

127. Peters and Woolley.

Security reforms via individual saving accounts. Foreign policy is centered around the spread of democracy and freedom, encouragement of market liberalization and trade across the globe, and increases in defense spending and investment. There are changes on some domestic issues and more significant promotion of democratic principles, yet substantively, the platform remains in line with Reaganism.

The 2004 Platform

In the closest election in modern American presidential history, George W. Bush was the victor over Al Gore with 537 votes in Florida, which remains mildly controversial for various reasons. Then, of course, the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001, reshaped the political landscape, domestically and internationally, on so many issues. The Second Gulf War (Operation Iraqi Freedom) began in March of 2003, becoming another extremely relevant foreign policy topic. The platform is also dedicated to Ronald Reagan after his passing. Defense and foreign policy are critical to this platform, especially regarding the above issues.

Economically, the platform details the Bush tax cuts, Medicare reform, and the great benefits of free trade. The Bush tax cuts were presented as returning Americans' wealth to them, promoting investment, and arguing why they should be made permanent¹²⁸, very standard. Welfare reform is

128. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, "Republican Party Platforms, 2004 Republican Party Platform," The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara (hosted), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273450>.

briefly mentioned, but more attention is given to Medicare reform, primarily the drug benefit coverage, as “While others spent many years talking... this President and this Congress got it done.”¹²⁹ While not welfare and including several conservative policies, it was a notable expansion of a social program and a departure from limiting spending for such programs. Free trade is elevated to being explicitly a social good. It is given the evangelical mission of spreading “the benefits of freedom across the globe – by actively working to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world.”¹³⁰ Trade is more than economic development; it is social as well. While such ideas were present in prior platforms, they are far more fleshed out and central to this edition.

Foreign policy is front and center in this platform; the War on Terror and its various facets are prioritized. The Bush administration had “rallied America to its calling – to make the world safer and better.”¹³¹ The constant focus is on terrorism, terrorists, Afghanistan, and Iraq as countries being liberated and stabilized. The platform firmly emphasizes the righteousness and necessity of invading Iraq, saying, “we have confirmed that Saddam Hussein had the capability to reconstitute his weapons programs and the desire to do so. Our nation did the right thing... [Bush] chose defending America.”¹³² While also promoting new authorities like the Department of Homeland Security

129. Peters and Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, 2004 Republican Party Platform.”

130. Peters and Woolley.

131. Peters and Woolley.

132. Peters and Woolley.

and the PATRIOT Act, calling for increased defense spending to meet the responsibilities of the war and expanding investment into new programs.

This platform was deeply affected by the War on Terror, heralding a new era of American interventionism in Afghanistan and Iraq, which are staunchly supported. These were seen as liberating, democratizing missions and are defended as such. The emphasis on freedom and liberty takes on new heights in the platform, even in economic areas. Tax cuts are justified as such, but Medicare reform also expands social spending. Free trade evangelism is elevated to the next degree, increasingly taking on not just an economic good role but a social emphasis beyond previous platforms.

2.6 John McCain

The 2008 Platform

In 2008, the Great Financial Crisis was underway and would soon spark the Great Recession right in the middle of a presidential contest. The economic crash shook the foundations of the electorate and upended the presidential election. This issue would upend the campaign of Senator John McCain of Arizona, a conservative fighter pilot shot down in Vietnam, who won the Republican presidential primary. His platform is similar to the Bush era's but somewhat more conservative on balance and still in line with Reagan's vision.

Economically, the platforms seek to permanently enact the Bush-era tax

cuts, reform health care without expanding social programs, and support regional economic trade initiatives. The most significant economic policy would be “making the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts permanent so American families will not face a large tax hike.”¹³³ This would lock in the tax cuts passed during the Bush administration and, in so doing, spur economic growth, families, and small businesses while keeping the government in check. Health care reform was a vital issue, with the platform promoting widespread reform while simultaneously ruling out new government taxes, benefits, or entitlements.¹³⁴ Regarding free trade, the platform emphasizes the economics: “Greater international trade, aggressively advanced on a truly level playing field, will mean more American jobs, higher wages, and a better standard of living.”¹³⁵ However, it drops the emphasis on free trade as a social good.

Much like the 2004 platform, this platform is highly interested in foreign policy and defense issues. America’s foreign policy would remain “Peace through strength,” but the platform shies away from the Bush administration’s explicit interventionism. The platform continues the calls for investment in missile defense, intelligence, and anti-terrorism capabilities yet does not propose the broad-based defense spending increases called for by earlier Republican platforms.

Overall, the platform is mildly more conservative than its immediate pre-

133. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, 2008 Republican Party Platform,” The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara (hosted), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/278999>.

134. Peters and Woolley.

135. Peters and Woolley.

decessor but engages in the same ideological framework. It calls for permanently enacting the Bush tax cuts, shies away from significant spending increases across the board, and is a less forceful proponent of free trade.

2.7 Mitt Romney

The 2012 Platform

The unpopularity of President George W. Bush and the generational talent of Senator Barack Obama of Illinois, in conjunction with the economic crisis, were too much for McCain's campaign, which was defeated. In 2012, the second straight open Republican presidential primary, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney prevailed. With the Great Recession still a significant factor, this platform is more direct with the economic reality than its predecessor.

The economic policy takes the lead, with the platform calling for extending the Bush-era tax cuts, smaller government spending and regulations, expanding work requirements for welfare, and moderation around free trade. Extending the Bush tax cuts is seen as spurring economic growth, as "Excessive taxation and regulation impede economic development. Lowering taxes promotes substantial economic growth and reducing regulation encourages business formation and job creation."¹³⁶ Work requirements for welfare pro-

136. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, "Republican Party Platforms, 2012 Republican Party Platform," The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara (hosted), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/302338>.

grams would be expanded to new areas. Furthermore, the “fiscal nightmare of Obamacare, with over \$1 trillion in new taxes, multiple mandates, and a crushing price tag”¹³⁷ would be vociferously resisted and immediately repealed under a Republican president and Congress. The free trade section is conflicted as “International trade is crucial for our economy. . . a downside, however, as some governments have used a variety of unfair means to limit American access.”¹³⁸ For the first time, free trade is not the net positive it once was; now, it can cause economic losses if mishandled. The platform focuses its ire on China, and “a Republican President will. . . stand ready to impose countervailing duties.”¹³⁹ A Republican presidential candidate had never so forcefully threatened a trade war, a sign of the economic tensions already present in 2012. A Pew Research Center survey found that 53% of Americans saw China’s growing economic might as a bad thing in 2011, which may help contextualize the shift here.¹⁴⁰

On defense and foreign policy, the platform backs the classic Republican realist formula of peace through strength, reversing Obama’s defense cuts. The platform proclaims, “We are the party of peace through strength”¹⁴¹, a standard foreign policy framework for the party. On defense spending, the platform denounces Obama for “reduced the defense budget by over \$487

137. Peters and Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, 2012 Republican Party Platform.”

138. Peters and Woolley.

139. Peters and Woolley.

140. Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project, “China Seen Overtaking U.S. as Global Superpower: 23-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey” (Washington, D.C.) July 13, 2011, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2011/07/13/china-seen-overtaking-us-as-global-superpower/?src=prc-headline>.

141. Peters and Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, 2012 Republican Party Platform.”

billion over the next decade and fought Republican efforts to avoid another \$500 billion in automatic budget cuts.”¹⁴² The Republican party would ensure that defense investment in technology, military hardware, and other defense articles would continue to be cost-effective and bring security to America.

This platform is concretely in line with the Republican orthodoxy of the recent era, except for free trade. The platform calls for permanent tax cuts and deregulation, opposes welfare spending, and supports defense increases. However, it is less supportive of free trade, especially with China. The increased forceful attitude towards US-China trade results from increased pressure from voters who saw Chinese economic growth as threatening and American corporations’ continued calls to enforce their rights. The tension between free trade ideals and complex realities emerged.

2.8 Donald Trump

The 2016 Platform

For the third straight presidential election, there was an open Republican presidential primary. Its victor would be the noted businessman and media personality Donald Trump, whose campaign was and would continue to be highly controversial for his behavior, remarks, and various scandals. Economic recovery from the aftereffects of the Great Recession is prevalent throughout the platform.

142. Peters and Woolley.

Economic recovery is the key goal, which is to be accomplished through pro-growth policies. This includes “the establishment of a pro-growth tax code a moral imperative”¹⁴³ to rejuvenate the economy by eliminating anti-growth provisions. Welfare reform via the “dynamic compassion of work requirements in a growing economy”¹⁴⁴ would encourage job creation and opportunities and reduce dependence that Obama administration reforms had created. The platform also calls for the repeal of Obamacare and the terrible economic impacts it had. The platform is much more protectionist on free trade, saying that if “agreements do not adequately protect U.S. interests, U.S. sovereignty, or when they are violated with impunity, they must be rejected.”¹⁴⁵ Regarding China, the platform describes the Obama administration’s handling of unfair trade practices as “a virtual surrender”¹⁴⁶, and opposes the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

On foreign policy, the platform highlights the myriad dangers of the world and how America and our military can respond. After the Obama administration’s weakness and budget cuts, “our enemies have been emboldened and our national security is at great risk.”¹⁴⁷ The platform calls for “the Republican Party is committed to rebuilding the U.S. military into the strongest on

143. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, 2016 Republican Party Platform,” The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara (hosted), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/318311>.

144. Peters and Woolley.

145. Peters and Woolley.

146. Peters and Woolley.

147. Peters and Woolley.

earth”¹⁴⁸ via strengthening our conventional forces and investing in strategic programs. The negativity around foreign policy aligns with prior platforms when Republicans are out of the White House and evokes the ghost of the Carter administration.

The 2016 platform does not mark a dramatic break with Republican orthodoxy across the board. On many issues, it resembles prior Republican platforms and administrations; it calls for tax cuts, welfare cuts, and work requirements, reforms to Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, and increases in defense spending and investment. One area where it did mark a more concrete break is hesitance and skepticism around free trade. While the 2012 platform questioned free trade, this platform wanted to take a harder line on the issue and skeptically review any new agreements.

The 2020 Platform

In 2020, there was no official party platform, but rather, a resolution of support. The most substantive section was regarding the “unanimously agreed to reassert the Party’s strong support for President Donald Trump and his Administration.”¹⁴⁹ The resolution is devoid of policy and ideology, just loyalty to Donald Trump and opposition to whatever the policies of the Biden campaign and the Democratic Party are. The platform symbolizes the hollowness

148. Peters and Woolley.

149. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, Resolution Regarding the Republican Party Platform,” The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara (hosted), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/342191>.

of the Republican party under Trump's leadership and his transformation of the party into a personalist vehicle for his own gain. By 2020, Donald Trump had taken over the party entirely and could suborn or exile any figures that could threaten his control. The resolution is a symbol of what Trump and the Party value: loyalty and deference towards himself and opposing the Democrats and their allies in the media.

The lack of a platform similarly exposes the limits around analyzing party platforms, whether they can be restarted or ignored or not done when the party chooses to. Party platforms are not perfect predictors of behavior, and at the moment, it can be challenging to see which parts will be acted on and which will not. The 2016 platform was not indicative of the descent into personalism that is the 2020 platform, exposing the limits of this line of analysis. Nevertheless, the absence of a platform is in and of itself an incredibly revealing development. That the Republican party did not or could not do anything more substantive than a statement of support reveals how intellectually bankrupt it has become.

2.9 Changes In The Electorate

The electorate seemed to have played a role in affecting the issue salience of individual party platforms, but prior to the 2012 Romney and 2016 Trump party platforms, the overall Reaganist framework does appear to be firmly locked in. However, the electorate of the 1980s and the 2016 and 2020 Presi-

dential elections experienced drastic changes over this time frame. We must review the changes in the electorate holistically over the whole time frame to understand better the conditions that allowed Donald Trump to win in 2016 and take control of the Republican party.

First, looking at the presidential elections of the Reagan era itself. During the presidential elections of the 1980s, the primary factor of Republican victories was that “voting patterns show little ideological voting, but rather voting based on the judgment of the performance of an incumbent administration.”¹⁵⁰ So, rather than a mass conservative uprising being the reason for Reagan and George H. W. Bush’s victories, more traditional concerns around economic health and well-being were the drivers of vote choice.

Several new phenomena developed in the American electorate, such as the rise of ideological voting, political polarization on various fronts, and increasing numbers and political influence of minority voters. Political polarization developed as “voter shifts and the Southern Democratic political party realignment in the 1970s and 1980s led to increased party polarization in the 1990s and 2000s as Americans sorted into more ideologically homogeneous political parties.”¹⁵¹ These ideologically differing and increasingly hostile parties led to increased polarization among voters as well. One of the most important developments is educational polarization among white voters

150. Larry M Schwab, *The Illusion of a Conservative Reagan Revolution* (Routledge, 2017).

151. Abramowitz and McCoy, “United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump’s America.”

as

In the elections between 1984 and 2000, white college-educated voters supported the Republican candidate at a higher rate than white non-college voters — though this group never supported Reagan’s successor candidates at as high a rate. The 2000 election marked the beginning of a process of educational polarization among white voters that continued at least through 2020¹⁵²

This divide and what drives Trump’s support among his voters is what is most relevant to this section. Dr. William Marble, the Director of Data Science for the University of Pennsylvania, found that “white college-educated voters have become increasingly liberal on economic issues, pushing them toward the Democratic party. Simultaneously, non-college voters have come to base their voting decisions more heavily on their conservative cultural attitudes.”¹⁵³ Increased salience of cultural issues and debates, ‘the culture war,’ helped attract white non-college-educated voters toward Republicans and away from Democrats. At the same time, Democrats persuaded more upper-middle-class college graduates over the past twenty years. These findings have been echoed in other research with “gradual erosion of the socially conservative hegemony...has triggered a negative authoritarian counter-reaction among...a backlash that has been especially powerful in mobilizing older generations of white men in rural communities.”¹⁵⁴

152. William Marble, “What Explains Educational Polarization Among White Voters?” (), <https://williammarble.co/docs/EducPolarization.pdf>.

153. Marble.

154. Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*.

The power of racial issues is also apparent as white working-class voters shifted parties along racial resentment lines during the 21st Century, a shift that was highlighted but predated by Barack Obama.¹⁵⁵ While only 62% of the most racially resentful white working-class voters supported George W. Bush, by 2016, that figure had climbed to 87%, while the least racially resentful white working-class voters fled for the Democratic Party.¹⁵⁶ In the 2016 election specifically among all white voters, those “with high levels of racial/ethnic resentment voted overwhelmingly for Trump regardless of education.”¹⁵⁷ Issue salience is what appears to have been vital for Trump, by priming his audience with his meld of xenophobia and economic grievances, he was able to accelerate the shift that had been taking place over the past several decades. These voters also tend to be more skeptical of institutions and accepting of strongman rhetoric and actions, providing the right-wing authoritarian populist base for Trump that he needs to gain and hold power.

2.10 Conclusion

There are changes in the party platforms, but not necessarily the ones I expected. My initial hypothesis regarding a significant break on domestic and foreign policy issues for Donald Trump is largely absent in the 2016 party platform. My hypothesis of changes in party platforms primarily being a

155. Abramowitz and McCoy, “United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump’s America.”

156. Abramowitz and McCoy.

157. Abramowitz and McCoy.

'top-down' process appears confirmed as while Republican candidates emphasized different issue priorities or specific solutions to deal with the issues of their day, they do seem to have continued to work under the framework of Ronald Reagan, modifying it as needed. The platforms of Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bob Dole are all ideologically similar, with little if any changes on the issue basis that I analyzed. The platforms of George W. Bush emphasized freedom, democracy, and liberty to new extents, using them as conceptual markers to build support for their policies while reacting to the aftermath of September 11th. Only on the issues of welfare limited to Medicaid Part D and free trade was there some ideological change, but it was in line with previous platforms and would be dropped subsequently. The 2008 platform and 2012 platforms seem like a return to previous platforms. However, the 2012 platform started to forcefully raise the economic losses of free trade, especially around China, which may have been driven by increased concern among Chinese relative economic dominance among voters and Republican party elites. In 2016, Trump's platform did not mark a clear break as I had expected, except around the issue of free trade. The tension between free trade as a concept and in practice that undergirded the 2012 platform section resolved itself in 2016 in favor, if not protectionism, at least halting market liberalization right where it was. It would have been hard to predict in 2016 that in 2020, the party platform boiled down to nothing more than devotion to their chosen candidate, Donald Trump. The 2020 party platform

of passing a resolution supporting Trump and adopting the previous party platform is unprecedented for a major political party in modern history. It is symbolic of the party's enthrallment with Donald Trump and his lack of commitment to policy or ideology beyond his embrace of right-wing authoritarian populism.

Party platforms can be valuable indicators of behavior in the office of presidential candidates. Now, accounting for presidential influence, mainly to what extent their fellow party members control Congress, the party platforms served as guideposts for what an administration wanted to do and tried to accomplish. Republican presidents did have to compromise with Democratic Congresses or vice versa, which entailed some policy wins and losses as the balance of power shifted. Nevertheless, party platforms served as valuable indicators of desired direction, in some cases not just of what a particular presidential candidate or the party would support at that moment but as presaging future change on issue prioritization and ideological or policy shifts. This is most identifiable from the free trade section of the 2012 platform, retrospectively demonstrating that the party might move in a less supportive direction on the issue of international trade and market liberalization. Still, the example of the 2016 party platform and the 2020 resolution demonstrates that any predictive power is limited and qualified in nature. The platforms would not serve as significantly effective indicators of creeping authoritarianism; the rigidity of Reaganist doctrine hides the shifts taking

place among white voters.

From the 1990s to the 2020s, white college and non-college-educated voters increasingly clustered in the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively. This shift was driven both by cultural changes and economic inequality. Yet, the former played a much more significant role, as cultural conservatism and racial resentment served as critical variables in whether white voters supported Republican presidential candidates or Democratic ones. This does support my hypothesis that the changes in the Republican party electorate from the 1980s to the 2020s became more accepting of conservative authoritarian populism as voters supportive of those issue frameworks sorted into the Republican party, and candidates were more able to use that to their advantage.

CHAPTER 3

There and Back Again: Republican Presidents, Their Views of Executive Unilateralism and the Imperial Presidency

3.1 Overview

When Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, the shadow of Richard Nixon's broad view of presidential authority still loomed over the country, as it was only six years after Nixon's resignation. Throughout Reagan and his successors, the Republican Party embraced an increasingly broad view of presidential power and authority, if not to the same extent as Nixon. Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush were connected to the Iran-Contra scandal, where George W. Bush This trend finally resulted in Donald Trump's efforts

to subvert the 2020 election after he lost, culminating in the January 6th, 2021 insurrection.

Yet to point the finger at Donald Trump as the President who expanded executive power ignores how the concept of executive power and authority has changed between the Reagan and Trump eras and the degree to which Donald Trump's conservative authoritarian populism nature influenced his more modern conception of expansive presidential power. Over the past twenty years, Congress has ceded portions of its policymaking power to the executive branch, becoming more polarized and less influential over governance.¹⁵⁸ Simultaneously, the number and (to a lesser extent) the rate of new executive orders, a hallmark of executive power, have trended downwards.¹⁵⁹ This diminishment of Congress's centralization of the checks and balances of the federal government has encouraged or necessitated, depending on your view, that the executive branch assumes more significant control over the policymaking process via executive action.

3.2 Ronald Reagan

Before Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, Democrats had controlled both houses of Congress since the Eisenhower midterm elections of 1954. With

158. Carmines and Fowler, "The Temptation of Executive Authority: How Increased Polarization and the Decline in Legislative Capacity Have Contributed to the Expansion of Presidential Power."

159. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, "Executive Orders," ed. John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* (Santa Barbara, CA) 1999-2024, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/323876>.

Reagan's landslide victory of 50.1% of the vote to 41.9%, Republicans flipped twelve Senate seats, including that of prominent Democrats such as George McGovern, Frank Church, or Warren Magnuson among the defeated.¹⁶⁰ Now it seemed the more conservative Republicans in the Senate and White House would be given the chance to implement their goals while the more liberal Democrats who controlled the House of Representatives.

Once Ronald Reagan took office in 1980, the party's conservative wing had the President they had been pushing for since 1976.¹⁶¹ The conservative movement, with Reagan at their head, had plenty of priorities they wanted to enact, such as low taxes, reduced welfare spending, free trade, increased military spending, and a militant interventionist foreign policy.¹⁶² Campaigning on the platform is one thing, but implementation and getting the House Democrats to agree was another. One measure of his success in accomplishing these goals is to examine the "Congressional Quarterly's presidential support scores. This is a measure of the votes in which congressional majorities voted the same as the stated position of the President."¹⁶³ This indicator demonstrates a level of support in Congress for presidential priorities to what degree a president can succeed in their legislative agenda. Compared to other post-World War II presidents, relatively speaking, "Reagan did post

160. Daniel S Lucks, *Reconsidering Reagan: Racism, Republicans, and the Road to Trump* (Beacon Press, 2020).

161. Lucks.

162. Goethals, *Realignment, Region, and Race: Presidential Leadership and Social Identity*.

163. Seib, *We Should Have Seen it Coming: From Reagan to Trump—a Front-Row Seat to a Political Revolution*.

high presidential support scores the first two years, but compiled moderate and low scores during the final six years. An analysis of the entire eight years shows that Reagan had a moderate-to-poor record of success rather than the great success.”¹⁶⁴ Legislatively, Reagan was less successful after his first two years, with his later congressional support waxing and waning over time.

On the issues analyzed above in Chapter 2 (low taxes, reduced welfare spending, free trade, increased military spending, and a militant interventionist foreign policy), Ronald Reagan had a mixed record of success across his eight years in office. While defense spending did increase “from \$133 billion in 1980 to \$290 billion in 1988, or from 4.9 percent to 5.9 percent of GDP,”¹⁶⁵ this was substantially less than Reagan had requested in his presidential budgets.¹⁶⁶ Free trade was promoted yet was not significantly expanded. Foreign policy was primarily up to the President’s discretion; however, the Iran-Contra scandal was perhaps the greatest blunder of the Reagan administration, which will be discussed in more detail below. On domestic grounds of the ever-present issues of taxes and welfare programs, Reagan was less successful in accomplishing his goals compared to the more defense and foreign policy-oriented areas, notching some key early wins and mixed records later on.¹⁶⁷

164. Schwab, *The Illusion of a Conservative Reagan Revolution*.

165. Michael A Genovese, Todd L Belt, and William W Lammers, *The Presidency and Domestic Policy: Comparing Leadership Styles, FDR to Biden* (Taylor & Francis, 2024).

166. Schwab, *The Illusion of a Conservative Reagan Revolution*.

167. Genovese, Belt, and Lammers, *The Presidency and Domestic Policy: Comparing Leadership Styles, FDR to Biden*.

This lack of legislative success could have led to an executive branch being more interested in unilateral action and control of the executive branch; however, there were mixed results on that front. In terms of administrative style, Reagan “had less involvement in the operation of his administration than any president during the past fifty years. In the Reagan administration, the President would set broad policy and then delegate.”¹⁶⁸ Reagan did not believe in the centralized, personally directed style of leadership and was not intensely policy-focused.¹⁶⁹ However, it would be a mistake to say that Reagan was uninterested in achieving his goals or gaining control of the executive branch to implement them more effectively.

In one of the most recognizable and harsh examples of this, President Reagan cemented his willingness to stand tough with the air traffic controller’s strike of 1981. Despite being a “past president of the Screen Actors Guild, the only former union official ever to occupy the Oval Office, a man whose election PATCO had endorsed only nine months earlier.”¹⁷⁰ Reagan sent dismissal notices out to some 11,345 strikers,” and ultimately, the PATCO strike was one the costliest strikes in American history.¹⁷¹ Nevertheless, his firm resolution of the crisis, banning strikers from returning to the FAA, signaled his resolve. Symbolically, he would not allow a part of the federal government to

168. Schwab, *The Illusion of a Conservative Reagan Revolution*.

169. Genovese, Belt, and Lammers, *The Presidency and Domestic Policy: Comparing Leadership Styles, FDR to Biden*.

170. Joseph A McCartin, *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike That Changed America* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

171. McCartin.

disobey the law and reject his authority.

Yet the most significant application of executive overreach, and also the most considerable misconduct of the Reagan administration, was the Iran-Contra scandal. The Iran-Contra scandal is a long, complex saga that I will only briefly discuss, focusing on the aspects of executive unilateralism. Basically, the idea was to “initial sale of arms to the Iranians and for the idea that the funds gained from such sales could be used for “off the books” policy initiatives such as backing the Contras.”¹⁷² After the Iranian Revolution, U.S.-Iran relations had considerably deteriorated, with American citizens being held hostage for 444 days; nearly simultaneously in Nicaragua, communist and anti-communist revolutionaries were fighting a civil war, and the Reagan administration wanted to support the anti-communist Contras. Thanks to the Boland Amendment¹⁷³, Congress “barred the CIA and Department of Defense (DOD) from supporting military activities” in Nicaragua beyond halting the flow of weapons.¹⁷⁴ Federal appropriations could not be used to support the Contras after allegations of the Reagan administration exceeding American policy interests and being actively involved in regime change operations.

172. Richard P. Barberio, “The Reagan Administration and Iran-Contra,” in *Presidents and Political Scandal: Managing Scandal in the Modern Era* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 59–77, ISBN: 978-3-030-45504-0, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-45504-0_4.

173. Matt Barker, Seth MacFarlane, and Mike Weitzman, “Stanny Slickers II: The Legend of Ollie’s Gold,” Directed by Pam Cooke, Ron Hughart and Anthony Lioli, featuring Seth MacFarlane, Wendy Schaal, and Scott Grimes, *American Dad* Season 3, Episode 15 (Aired May 11th, 2008, in broadcast syndication), <https://www.hulu.com/series/977c8e25-cde0-41b7-80ce-e746f2d2093f>.

174. Malcolm Byrne, *Iran-Contra: Reagan’s Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power* (University Press of Kansas, 2017).

This ban on funding for the Contras and or American efforts to resupply them is half the equation; the other half was the sale of weaponry to the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran to release hostages being held by Hezbollah in Lebanon.¹⁷⁵ Given Iran's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism after 1980, "selling arms to the Iranians was likely illegal, no matter how it was passed through other nations or papered over with retroactive finding," according to Reagan's own Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger.¹⁷⁶ The other half of the equation of using those funds for supplies for the Contras, if not illegal, was undoubtedly against congressional intent in the Boland Amendment. Iran-Contra was ultimately the tale of the executive refusing to heed the legality of Congressional mandates. It was the broadest example of executive unilateralism since the Nixon administration.

When the scandal inevitably came to light, the response from the Reagan administration would be mirrored decades later, of fingerpointing, blame, and covering up evidence. There were "attempts to shift blame away from President Reagan... battle lines over just who would take the blame for the arms sales to Iran were drawn"¹⁷⁷ as the administration tried to figure out a plan. Despite a televised presidential address to try and deflect the issue, "Public opinion polls taken in the wake of Reagan's speech showed that nearly 80% of the American public did not believe him."¹⁷⁸ When President Reagan

175. Barberio, "The Reagan Administration and Iran-Contra."

176. Barberio.

177. Barberio.

178. Barberio.

testified in front of Congress to finally defuse the scandal, his performance and evasiveness “was a major reason why President Reagan ended up with such a poor reputation as an administrator. The hearings and reports on the affair painted a picture of an administration headed by a president who was incredibly uninformed and detached from the basic activities under his control.”¹⁷⁹ Ultimately, President Reagan was never charged with a crime, and it is difficult to establish a criminal charge beyond a reasonable doubt given the complexity involved on all sides. Though, as a side note, the independent counsel appointed to investigate the scandal, “[Lawrence] Walsh indicated in his report that he was open to charging President Reagan with a crime if the evidence warranted it, a very different interpretation of the legal status of a sitting president from the one held by Robert Mueller in his investigation of Donald Trump.”¹⁸⁰

Ronald Reagan did not embrace executive unilateralism to the sheer extent of Richard Nixon and generally had mixed results in his fights with Congress or the other branches of government. Yet his involvement in attempting to free American citizens in Lebanon via missile sales to Iran and then trying to launder the proceeds to Nicaraguan anti-communists likely violated several laws and was in direct defiance of Congress.

179. Schwab, *The Illusion of a Conservative Reagan Revolution*.

180. Barberio, “The Reagan Administration and Iran-Contra.”

3.3 George H.W. Bush

George H.W. Bush is an oft-forgotten figure in American politics, beyond his leadership with the First Gulf War, being overshadowed by Ronald Reagan before him and then Bill Clinton afterward. Still, his presidency is worth analyzing; in the context of executive power, he was involved in the Iran-Contra scandal as Vice President and then helped bury the matter as President.

George H.W. Bush promised a different view of administering the executive branch than his old boss and predecessor, Ronald Reagan. He wanted voters to know that “[Bush] went out of his way to stress that he would not follow Reagan’s managerial style. . . . He delegates less responsibility and is involved at a much lower level of detail than his predecessor. Bush knows much more about what is happening in his administration.”¹⁸¹ He wanted his administration to be more centralized around himself, though he still worked with a tight circle of top staff and cabinet members as advisors.¹⁸²

Like many other officials from the Reagan Administration, George H.W. Bush proclaimed that he was not involved in the Iran-Contra scandal and was unaware of what was occurring, like President Reagan. Bush said that “he was absent during some of the meetings. . . over the arms sales and that he did know about the policy, but—much as Reagan maintained—he did not

181. Schwab, *The Illusion of a Conservative Reagan Revolution*.

182. Genovese, Belt, and Lammers, *The Presidency and Domestic Policy: Comparing Leadership Styles, FDR to Biden*.

believe that the arms sales were predicated on the return of hostages.”¹⁸³ Bush was not as directly impacted by the scandal as Reagan was in the public view. The effectiveness of the coverup and the template provided by Reagan of admitting partial knowledge while denying the rest “provided the framework for George H. W. Bush’s successful deflection of the matter during his run for the presidency in 1988.”¹⁸⁴ Once elected, he quietly “brought the investigation into the prosecutions of those involved with the scandal to an end by pardoning key players in the events that made up Iran-Contra and the coverup that ensued”¹⁸⁵, thus ending the scandal and letting it fade out of the public consciousness where it had been so prominent since 1986.

A key figure underpinning the legal rationale for these actions was William Barr. Barr served various leadership roles under Bush, the Elder’s Department of Justice, quickly rising through the ranks to become his Attorney General.¹⁸⁶ As Attorney General, Barr was instrumental in supporting “Bush’s pardons of six Reagan administration officials charged in the Iran-contra investigation, a move the independent counsel described at the time as ‘a coverup.’”¹⁸⁷ Barr advanced “the ‘unitary executive’ theory, rooted in Article II of the Constitution, which holds that the President controls the entire exec-

183. Barberio, “The Reagan Administration and Iran-Contra.”

184. Barberio.

185. Barberio.

186. Tom Hamburger, “How William Barr, Now Serving as a Powerful Ally for Trump, Has Championed Presidential Powers,” *Washington Post* May 16, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-william-barr-now-serving-as-a-powerful-ally-for-trump-has-championed-presidential-powers/2019/05/14/418fe6d4-727f-11e9-9eb4-0828f5389013_story.html.

187. Hamburger.

utive branch.”¹⁸⁸ Barr’s views on the presidency “grants presidents sweeping authority, Barr is part of a group of conservative intellectuals who have been leading the charge to expand the powers of the executive branch over the past four decades”¹⁸⁹ and arguing against limits placed on the presidency by the separation of powers. The ability of Congress to check against the President’s authority is a necessary part of accountability in our democratic system, even if that means allowing investigations by Congress that are more politically motivated than out of democratic concern. The Presidency was and should not be an island unto itself but one co-equal branch of government.

George H.W. Bush was not a strong proponent of executive unilateralism during his term in office. He did not seek to take control of independent federal agencies or dismiss Congressional directives to the extent that had occurred in Iran-Contra. Yet he did pardon those involved in the scandal, which helped end the subsequent investigation. Further, under his administration, the legal framework for executive unilateralism was significantly bolstered by Bill Barr’s tenure at the Department of Justice.

3.4 George W. Bush

When George W. Bush was elected in November of 2000, foreign policy was not the issue that received top billing in the election, and few could have predicted just to what extent he and his administration would change our

188. Hamburger.

189. Hamburger.

national security state. Bush was a supporter of the ‘unitary executive’ theory, outlined in the prior section, that held the president “controls all of the executive branch and has the authority to make all decisions he deems necessary to run it.”¹⁹⁰ Beyond his vast expansion of the national security state in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, he also realized the power of the administrative state in making policy and side-stepping Congress.

George Bush’s advancement of presidential power was far from limited to foreign policy or national security but directly involved many domestic or administrative areas. As President, he was the strongest supporter of the unitary executive since Nixon, as he was “vigorous in his defense of the unitary executive. In fact he publicly referred to the —unitary executive theory. . . a total of 148 times over the course of his eight years in office. President Bush advanced unitarian principles from the moment he took office in 2001.”¹⁹¹ Bush and his administration felt that they were “not just protecting presidential power, but also in restoring it to its pristine state pre-Watergate.”¹⁹² Administratively, “Bush, like his predecessors, viewed the appointment strategy as a necessary mechanism for asserting control over the wider executive branch. The President made it clear early on that he would not tolerate

190. Genovese, Belt, and Lammers, *The Presidency and Domestic Policy: Comparing Leadership Styles, FDR to Biden*.

191. Meenekshi Bose, *President Or King?: Evaluating the Expansion of Executive Power from Abraham Lincoln to George W. Bush* (Nova Science Publishers, 2011).

192. Bose.

disobedient agency heads.”¹⁹³ Their goal was to implement, expand, and preserve the institutional authority of the presidency from what they saw as interference from Congress, which institutionally was more akin to a rival than an equal.

Bush favored not just the unitary executive theory but rather “cloak[ed] itself in the unitary executive theory while pushing naked unilateralism all in the name of politics.”¹⁹⁴ His use of signing statements demonstrated this expansive view, that signal “more important use of signing statements, however, has been to register questions about the constitutionality of the law in question.”¹⁹⁵ Bush went beyond signaling favored provisions or questioning the constitutional legality of the laws in question; he “asserted discretion in which provisions of the law to enforce.”¹⁹⁶ This was a significant step toward executive unilateralism¹⁹⁷, selectively enforcing or even interpreting the provisions of the law in ways that Congress did not intend or support.

the executive power was the indivisible purview of the President was appended the assertion that the scope of that executive power was also defined by the President. This gave new resonance to the older claim that Congress could not infringe legislatively on the President’s constitutional authority. In this view, not only could the President act when Congress had not acted in a given area, but

193. Bose.

194. Bose.

195. James P Pfiffner, “The Contemporary Presidency Constraining Executive Power: George W. Bush and the Constitution,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2008): 123–143.

196. Genovese, Belt, and Lammers, *The Presidency and Domestic Policy: Comparing Leadership Styles, FDR to Biden*.

197. Bose, *President Or King?: Evaluating the Expansion of Executive Power from Abraham Lincoln to George W. Bush*.

even in the face of congressional opposition.¹⁹⁸

The NSA surveillance scandal demonstrated an example of this broad conception of executive power. In the aftermath of 9/11, there was a broad expansion of American intelligence collection and operations, including electronic surveillance. Previous court reforms (in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal) required the use of warrants for domestic electronic surveillance by the United States government.¹⁹⁹ Yet Bush embarked on a massive expansion of electronic surveillance by “instead, he secretly ordered the NSA to conduct the surveillance and, when his actions were disclosed, [Bush] asserted that he had the constitutional authority to ignore the law.”²⁰⁰ Bush’s view was that it was authorized indirectly in the congressional authorization of military force to respond to 9/11, despite not being present; fundamentally, “to the extent that FISA infringed upon the Commander in Chief power, it was itself unconstitutional.”²⁰¹ A sweeping rejection of the checks and balances system and the concept of limits in general.

These are just a few examples of President Bush’s whole-hearted embrace of executive unilateralism surpassing Reagan’s Iran-Contra efforts and Bush the Elder’s grounding of the ‘unitary executive’ theory into law. George W. Bush conceived of and attempted to implement a sweeping expansion

198. Bose, *President Or King?: Evaluating the Expansion of Executive Power from Abraham Lincoln to George W. Bush*.

199. Pfiffner, “The Contemporary Presidency Constraining Executive Power: George W. Bush and the Constitution.”

200. Pfiffner.

201. Bose, *President Or King?: Evaluating the Expansion of Executive Power from Abraham Lincoln to George W. Bush*.

of presidential authority around electronic surveillance, administrative policy and appointments, regulatory bodies, and foreign policy.²⁰² Now, while foreign policy is often the remit of the President, there are limits on these powers, limits Bush did not acknowledge until forced to do so by Congress and the Supreme Court. Bush's actions on surveillance, 'enhanced interrogation,' and 'enemy combatants' were indicative of a president who believed that he had nigh-total control over certain areas of policy.²⁰³ George W. Bush implemented executive unilateralism to a new degree.

3.5 Donald Trump

When discussing the views and practices of Donald Trump on executive power, it is necessary to remember that while Trump has less defined political or policy beliefs, he has a strong belief and adherence to the 'unitary executive' theory, which he takes to the point of unilateralism to a differing but similarly expansive view as George W. Bush. The number of scandals and struggles he faced was often self-inflicted due to his autocratic leadership.

As President, Donald Trump demanded total loyalty from his subordinates, wanting to control the bureaucracy to fight the 'deep state' that was preventing conservative goals from being implemented. He "demanded loy-

202. Pfiffner, "The Contemporary Presidency Constraining Executive Power: George W. Bush and the Constitution."

203. Jon Herbert, "Revisiting Arthur Schlesinger's The Imperial Presidency: Richard Nixon, George W. Bush, and Executive Power," in *Watergate Remembered: The Legacy for American Politics*, ed. Michael A. Genovese and Iwan W. Morgan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2012), 29–51, ISBN: 978-1-137-01198-5, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137011985.2>.

alty from his advisors and appointees and was notoriously thin-skinned when criticized, to the extent of attempting to use the power of his office to silence critics.”²⁰⁴ His penchant for unquestioned loyalty led him to conflict with some of his appointees, most notably including James Comey, then-Director of the FBI, and later Mark Milley, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.²⁰⁵ To the degree that Trump acknowledged the federal bureaucracy, it was solely a target, the now infamous ‘deep state.’ He transformed the federal government by “targeting many government departments and agencies and then changing their leadership, replacing them with his acolytes, getting rid of senior civil service staff, and ignoring experienced and expert advice.”²⁰⁶ He felt that federal bureaucracy was subverting his desires and hindering his policy goals. He found it easier to use political appointees who were directly loyal to him to accomplish his goals. His intense downsizing of certain sub-departments or leaving vacant positions meant that “Trump was creating generational vacuums of expertise that seriously undermined the long-term efficacy of state institutions”²⁰⁷ and increased his own power as President.

Rather than collaborating legislatively with Congress, he focused on using the administrative or regulatory powers of the executive branch. He “often resorted to executive authority to expand his power and achieve his policy

204. Genovese, Belt, and Lammers, *The Presidency and Domestic Policy: Comparing Leadership Styles, FDR to Biden*.

205. Jeffrey. Goldberg, “The Patriot: How Mark Milley Held the Line,” *The Atlantic* October 2, 2023 (2023), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/11/general-mark-milley-trump-coup/675375/>.

206. John L Campbell, *Institutions under Siege: Donald Trump’s Attack on the Deep State* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

207. Campbell.

goals. . . a strategy recognized his weaknesses as a legislative president.”²⁰⁸ He was not interested or successful in the legislative arena and so preferred to use his executive authority to accomplish his outcomes via the regulatory process, which allowed him to circumvent Congress.²⁰⁹ Trump brought back Bill Barr as Attorney General, appreciating his questioning of the Muller investigation and sweeping view of executive power.²¹⁰ Now, with a President who was more inclined to his way of thinking around executive unilateralism than George H.W. Bush, Barr would be one of Trump’s most prominent defenders for most of his term in office.

The two impeachments he faced during and after his presidency best demonstrate Donald Trump’s view of executive, political, and personal power as a sweeping combination. There are plenty of other scandals worth further research. Still, for the purposes of this thesis, these two scandals symbolize the lengths to which he melded his expansive executive unilateralism with personal interests and authoritarian results.

The first impeachment stemmed from Donald Trump placing a halt on Congressionally appropriated weapons and other military aid to Ukraine in exchange for domestic political goals. Trump asked newly-elected Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky “ ‘to do us a favor’...asked Ukrainians to investigate unfounded allegations about former Vice President Joseph R. Biden

208. Genovese, Belt, and Lammers, *The Presidency and Domestic Policy: Comparing Leadership Styles, FDR to Biden*.

209. Genovese, Belt, and Lammers.

210. Hamburger, “How William Barr, Now Serving as a Powerful Ally for Trump, Has Championed Presidential Powers.”

Jr. . . as well as to chase a conspiracy theory that Ukraine, not Russia, had intervened in 2016.”²¹¹ Such efforts were extortionate given that the administration had placed a hold on \$391 million worth of U.S. support for the Ukrainian military, which constituted roughly equivalent to a tenth of its budget, against congressional appropriations and without notifying Congress of any reason for such hold. Gordon Sondland, former U.S. Ambassador to the European Union, said bluntly, “The Ukrainians should not expect the money if Mr. Zelensky did not publicly announce the investigations.”²¹² This scandal involved using military aid to coerce a foreign country, fighting an active conflict, to interfere with the 2020 U.S. presidential election, defying congressional mandates, and ultimately, to the personal political benefit of Donald Trump. The House impeached, and the Senate acquitted Trump on mainly party-line votes, save for a handful of outliers.²¹³ Trump faced little accountability for his actions, but they signaled the lengths he would go to accomplish personalistic political goals.

The second impeachment and scandal, regarding ‘The Big Lie,’ Donald Trump’s efforts to overturn the 2020 U.S. presidential election, directly threatened the foundations of our democracy. Trump had a history of refusing to acknowledge unsuccessful electoral outcomes, including the 2016 Iowa

211. Sharon LaFraniere, Andrew E. Kramer, and Danny Hakim, “Trump, Ukraine and Impeachment: The Inside Story of How We Got Here.,” *The New York Times* November 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/11/us/ukraine-trump.html>.

212. LaFraniere, Kramer, and Hakim.

213. Genovese, Belt, and Lammers, *The Presidency and Domestic Policy: Comparing Leadership Styles, FDR to Biden*.

Republican Caucus and the 2016 U.S. presidential election.²¹⁴ Already, these claims had “compromised many people’s faith in America’s electoral institutions. A Gallup poll found that while about half of Americans surveyed in 2006 expressed confidence that their elections were honest, that percentage dropped to less than a third in 2016.”²¹⁵ So, public confidence in elections had been declining prior to the 2020 election, with prior Trump claims serving as a primer for his supporters to question the validity of election outcomes, especially those unfavorable to Trump. Thanks to his “intellectual arrogance and narcissism. No matter what the issue, Trump had a very difficult time accepting facts that contradicted his views”²¹⁶ and could not accept that he lost to Joe Biden.

Therefore, Trump led an all-out campaign to ensure his ex post facto victory and to overturn the election results. His legal campaign amounted to little, with the final effort of *Texas v. Pennsylvania* being summarily dismissed from the Supreme Court (as a side note, future House Speaker Rep. Mike Johnson organized the Congressional Republican amicus brief in this). What happened next is more relevant. Once the legal channels were closed, Trump looked toward the political and often illegal ones. One idea would be to “ordering the Defense Department, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Homeland Security to seize voting machines in states that

214. Campbell, *Institutions under Siege: Donald Trump’s Attack on the Deep State*.

215. Campbell.

216. Campbell.

he suspected of voter fraud.”²¹⁷ This would amount to an unconstitutional usurpation of state governments by the federal government and immensely authoritarian. What Trump did in reality could hardly be called better. His attempts to convince Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensburger to overturn the election would later be a critical factor in a criminal prosecution by Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis.²¹⁸

Finally, on January 6th, 2021, Donald Trump’s pressure campaign to get everyone to overturn the election violently crashed into reality. He “encouraged his supporters to march on the Capitol and ‘fight like hell’..Seven people died during or after the melee.”²¹⁹ For this, he would be impeached, though the trial would not reach the Senate until after the inauguration, with seven Republicans²²⁰ joining the Senate Democrats to convict Trump, failing short by just nine votes of conviction. While his actions on January 6th are not directly a part of what is traditionally considered executive unilateralism, they show the logic taken to its final stage of autocracy: that the President is beyond law or democracy or the peaceful transition of power and is an authoritarian monarch.

Donald Trump embraced executive unilateralism as a matter of course. His personality and inclinations did not fit with checks and balances or the

217. Campbell, *Institutions under Siege: Donald Trump’s Attack on the Deep State*.

218. Aaron Blake, “Analysis — 4 Things Revealed by Trump’s Georgia Indictment,” *Washington Post* August 17, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/08/15/takeaways-trump-georgia-indictment/>.

219. Genovese, Belt, and Lammers, *The Presidency and Domestic Policy: Comparing Leadership Styles, FDR to Biden*.

220. Genovese, Belt, and Lammers.

separation of powers. His experience as the CEO of a private company left him unfamiliar with such a system and more used to the top-down leadership that demanded fealty. His use of executive actions in the regulatory or administrative areas on issues like immigration or climate change was a reflection of his disinclination to participate in the legislative process or compromise with Congressional democrats.²²¹ His actions regarding military aid to Ukraine demonstrated the complete and utter contempt for the idea that Congress had a role to play in foreign policy or even that foreign policy was anything beyond what Donald Trump personally thought would benefit him. His conservative populism was the justification for his belief in increasing his own political power to that of an autocrat, that “he alone could fix it.”²²²

Donald Trump’s presidency was a reminder that politics is what people make of it: our institutions, laws, and democratic attitudes. These are all based on a level of common acceptance. If a populist, anti-establishment figure gets elected, one might expect less respect for institutions or political norms. But Donald Trump delights in ignoring norms and conventions altogether and was able to build a similarly skeptical base, some of whom were willing to follow him to the point of violence to ensure his victory. Political violence is not new in America, nor are presidents who overreach their authority. Still, the melding of these two forces in a polarized society is a

221. Genovese, Belt, and Lammers.

222. Yoni Appelbaum, “Trump Claims, ‘I Alone Can Fix It’ during the Republican National Convention,” *The Atlantic*, July 22, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/trump-rnc-speech-alone-fix-it/492557/>.

deep cause for concern. The 2024 U.S. presidential election will be a rematch between Presidents Biden and Trump, the first rematch since 1956 and the first between two presidents since 1892.²²³

223. Jon Grinspan, “Opinion — 2024, Meet 1892, Your Doppelgänger,” sec. Opinion, *The New York Times* April 11, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/11/opinion/2024-1892-cleveland-harrison.html>.

CHAPTER 4

Final Thoughts

I hypothesized that Donald Trump marked a significant break from the Republican Party on social and economic issues, which he attempted to execute through his expansion of executive power. These developments were furthered by the changes in the electorate over the preceding decades since the victory of Ronald Reagan, which supported the Republican Party's populist and authoritarian elements, leading to Donald Trump's victory in 2016 and subsequent dominance over the Republican Party.

Based on the 2016 party platform, Donald Trump only marked a clear break on the issue of free trade, whereas the other issue areas remained in line with Republican orthodoxy. The lack of a party platform in the 2020 presidential election, with only a simple resolution to replace it, demonstrates a clear and significant break. The resolution signaled the lack of interest in policy, serving only as a loyalty pledge, a marker that the Republican party had been subsumed into a personalist vehicle for Donald Trump.

Party platforms can serve as valuable and important analytical tools, but for research purposes, they are generally more retrospective than forward-looking. Secondly, they are not suited for predicting authoritarian impulses. The electorate did play a role in allowing for the rise of authoritarian populism in the Republican party, as culturally more conservative white non-college-educated voters joined the Republican party. In contrast, college-educated white voters, who tended to be more socially and later economically liberal, shifted towards the Democratic Party. While the direction of this process is not wholly clear, it was probably a more bottom-up phenomenon that politicians like Newt Gingrich, George W. Bush, and the Tea Party movement took advantage of and reached an apex with Donald Trump.

Donald Trump's embrace of executive unilateralism must be carefully framed in context. While Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush were involved in the Iran-Contra affair, such brazen disregard for the law and Congress was not the general mode of conduct during either of their administrations. George W. Bush's administration is more complex. Ultimately, he viewed it as necessary to widely expand the powers of the presidency in order to accomplish his national security and foreign policy goals. This was taken far beyond the law or Congressional mandates, and he held the view that the presidency was the 'first among equals' if not the leading branch of government. His embrace of signing statements was another example of the vast amounts of presidential power he viewed available such that he could

pick and choose which provisions of the law he wished to enforce. Still, he would back down after losing fights with Congress and the Supreme Court over the illegality of the NSA's warrantless surveillance program, the use of torture by the CIA, the designation of 'enemy combatant' and their rights to trial, or due process among several noted controversies.

What distinguishes Donald Trump is his willingness to use this pattern of executive unilateralism for his own personal benefit, not in service to policy, political, or institutional goals. Trump saw himself as an elected autocrat and did not see anything wrong with asking a foreign country to meddle in American domestic politics for his gain or any of the countless other scandals. With regards to 'The Big Lie,' that is where Trump took his authoritarian populist, all-powerful presidency to the edge; as the authentic voice of Real America, he couldn't possibly be fairly defeated by the Democratic Party and Joe Biden. It had to be the biggest fraud ever perpetrated, and therefore, he was entitled to take his fight beyond the law to the brutal cold world of mob violence and of might makes right.

The point of this project is to remind people of the fragility of social consensus in a democratic society. If we cannot agree on what is democracy, or who won the last presidential election, then we are in for a long and dark road ahead. The Republican party will have to move beyond Donald Trump eventually one way or another; when that occurs, will the next Republican president, after Trump, advocate for executive unilateralism to

where it crosses the line from conservative populism to authoritarianism or not? Given the party's current state, it is hard to predict, and the difficulties demonstrated in Chapter 2 suggest that predictive power regarding authoritarianism is negligible primarily because it is so personalistic. Still, the Republican party will have to adapt and change to some extent to meet the new electorates of the future, which will necessitate the ability to win popular support to a much greater extent than they have in recent elections.

Already, we are seeing the Republican party try to use cultural conservatism to attract voters of color who are more moderate or conservative on social issues. The educational polarization of white voters also seems likely to increase or at least stay steady for the foreseeable future, helping fuel our polarized partisan politics. These and other recent electoral trends suggest that the close election results of the past few cycles likely continue.

What is needed is a societal and institutional response to the challenges posed by Donald Trump and the symbol of right-wing authoritarian populism he represents. Popular reforms include reforming the Electoral College, the filibuster, and the Senate, among others, to increase government efficiency and effectiveness, making it easier for policy to be passed legislatively and be implemented. Without strong incentives to do so, it is difficult to imagine the Republican party moving on from Donald Trump anytime soon. A significant loss in the 2024 elections would be enough to jolt the party and allow openings for new figures to take over, but if the party denies that it lost those incentives

lose some of their power. A more significant problem is that our democratic foundations have been shaken nearly to their core. Will the next Republican president peacefully transfer power to a democratic candidate who might have beaten him electorally? It will be a long, hard road to recover from the damage that Trump has inflicted on the Republican party and society at large, but it can, will, and must be done.

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