

# The Triumph of Polarized Partisanship in 2016: Donald Trump's Improbable Victory

GARY C. JACOBSON

REPUBLICAN DONALD TRUMP'S DEFECT OF Democrat Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election surprised a large majority of Americans of all political persuasions.<sup>1</sup> The same was true of most professional observers of national politics—politicians, political scientists, reporters, and commentators. In part, they were led astray by the consensus of polls, which had Clinton leading by an average margin somewhere between 2.3 and 3.6 percentage points over the last few days of the campaign.<sup>2</sup> This was not far from her actual margin, 2.1 percentage points, as she won the popular tally by more than 2.86 million votes. But the electoral vote is what matters, and Trump's narrow and largely unanticipated victories in the Rust Belt states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin put him over

<sup>1</sup>In the *Economist/YouGov* Poll of 12–15 November 2016, 66 percent of respondents, including majorities of all political persuasions, said they were surprised by Trump's victory, while 34 percent said they were not surprised; accessed at [https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/e1glb89vb3/econTabReport.pdf](https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/e1glb89vb3/econTabReport.pdf), 5 December 2016.

<sup>2</sup>The 2.3 average is from Real Clear Politics, accessed at [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/general\\_election\\_trump\\_vs\\_clinton\\_vs\\_johnson\\_vs\\_stein-5952.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/general_election_trump_vs_clinton_vs_johnson_vs_stein-5952.html), 5 December 2016; the 3.5 average is from Nate Silver's FiveThirtyEight, accessed at [http://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2016-election-forecast/?ex\\_cid=rrpromo](http://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2016-election-forecast/?ex_cid=rrpromo), 5 December 2016.

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GARY C. JACOBSON is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of California, San Diego. He has published extensively on U.S. elections and public opinion. His most recent book is *A Divider Not a Uniter: George W. Bush and the American People*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.



## WHY DONALD TRUMP SHOULD NEVER HAVE EVEN BEEN COMPETITIVE

The reasons that Trump should never have been in serious competition for the White House, let alone come to occupy it, are legion.

*First*, his nomination was opposed by nearly the entire Republican establishment—elected leaders, elder statesmen, most regular campaign contributors, and a large and prominent segment of the conservative commentariat. They objected variously to his personality and character, unorthodox positions on the economy (opposition to free trade and entitlement reform) and foreign policy (questioning traditional alliances, praising Vladimir Putin), and dubious devotion to social conservatism. They considered Trump's divisive rhetoric targeting immigrants and minorities a threat to the party's short- and long-term prospects by alienating, perhaps permanently, important and growing segments of the electorate.<sup>4</sup> Their critiques could be scathing. For example, columnist Peter Wehner, who had served in the Ronald Reagan and both Bush administrations, offered this appraisal at the beginning of the election year in January: "Mr. Trump's virulent combination of ignorance, emotional instability, demagoguery, solipsism and vindictiveness would do more than result in a failed presidency; it could very well lead to a national catastrophe. The prospect of Donald Trump as commander in chief should send a chill down the spine of every American. . . . If Mr. Trump heads the Republican Party, it will not longer be a conservative party, it will be an angry, bigoted, populist one."<sup>5</sup>

Trump enjoyed support from a handful of House Republicans as well as some conservative talk radio and Fox News personalities who were eager to join a right-wing populist crusade, but they were greatly outnumbered among Republican leaders and conservative intellectuals by his opponents. No fewer than 22 "movement" conservative luminaries, including Glenn Beck, L. Brent Bozell III, Mona Charen, Erick Erickson, William Kristol, Yuval Levin, Edwin Meese III, John Podhoretz, and Thomas Sowell, contributed to a *National Review* symposium denouncing Trump's candidacy.<sup>6</sup> Every living former Republican presidential candidate—both Bushes, Bob Dole, John McCain, and, most vocally, Mitt Romney—opposed him as well.

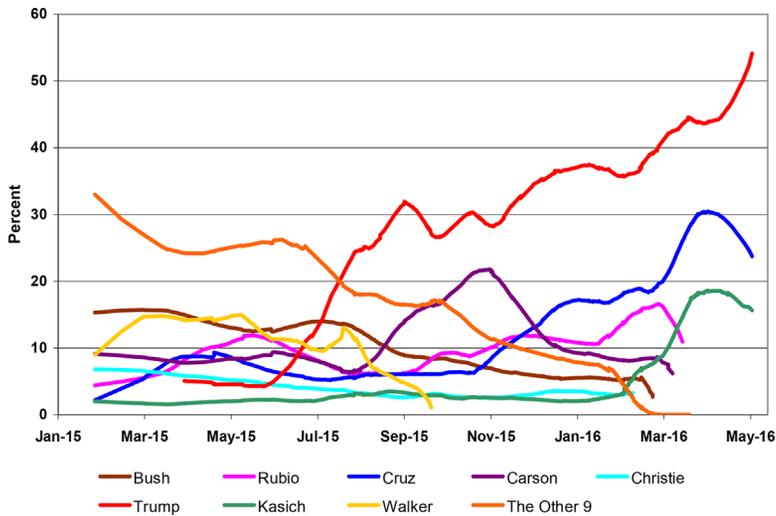
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<sup>4</sup>Gary C. Jacobson, "Polarization, Gridlock, and Presidential Campaign Politics in 2016," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 667 (September 2016): 226–246, at 223–237.

<sup>5</sup>Peter Wehner, "Why I Will Never Vote for Donald Trump," *The New York Times*, 14 January 2016.

<sup>6</sup>"Conservatives against Trump," *National Review*, 21 January 2016, accessed at <http://c7.nrostatic.com/article/430126/donald-trump-conservatives-oppose-nomination>, 5 January 2017.

FIGURE 2  
*Preferences for Republican Nomination, 2016*



All Republican efforts to derail Trump came to nothing; at least in 2016, the party elite emphatically did not decide the nomination.<sup>7</sup> Figure 2 displays the lowest-smoothed trends in support for candidates pursuing the Republican nomination in 2016.<sup>8</sup> Less than a month after announcing his candidacy, Trump had assumed a lead in the polls that he never relinquished. Underlining the Republican establishment's futility, the candidates who appeared to offer the strongest challenges—first Ben Carson, then Ted Cruz—were also insurgents, the latter disliked and distrusted by Republican leaders almost as much as Trump, albeit for somewhat different reasons.<sup>9</sup> The initial favorite among the regulars, Jeb Bush, lost what little popular support he initially had over the course of the primary season; John Kasich, their final surviving candidate, finished a distant third. Trump's hostile takeover of the Republican Party starkly exposed its national leaders' and intellectuals' impotence and disconnect from a large segment of the party's base.

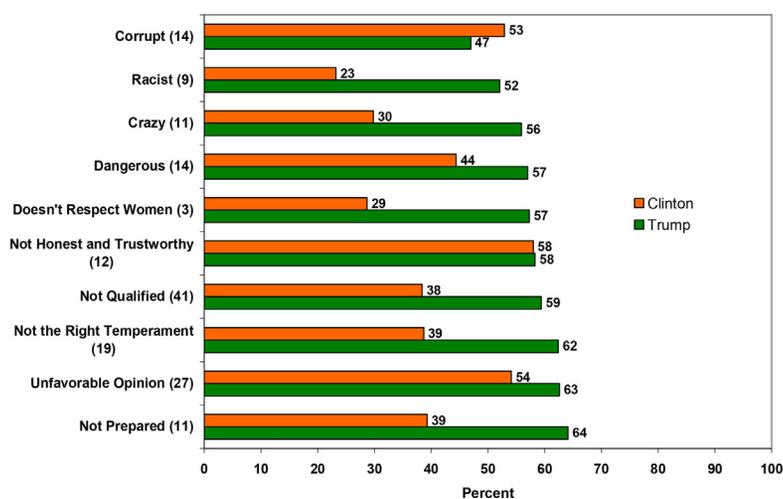
*Second*, much of the Republican opposition to Trump grew from assessments of Trump that were shared by most voters. During the primary and later general election campaigns, Trump displayed a remarkable ignorance of basic institutional features of the political system and the fundamentals of U.S. foreign and domestic policy, with no inclination to learn any more

<sup>7</sup>Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup>Figure 1 displays smoothed data from 312 surveys by 26 polling organizations reported at [pollingreport.com](http://pollingreport.com) and <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/pollster/> over the nomination campaigns.

<sup>9</sup>Jacobson, "Polarization," 238–240.

FIGURE 3  
Assessments of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump



Note: The number of surveys averaged is in parentheses.

Sources: See footnote 13.

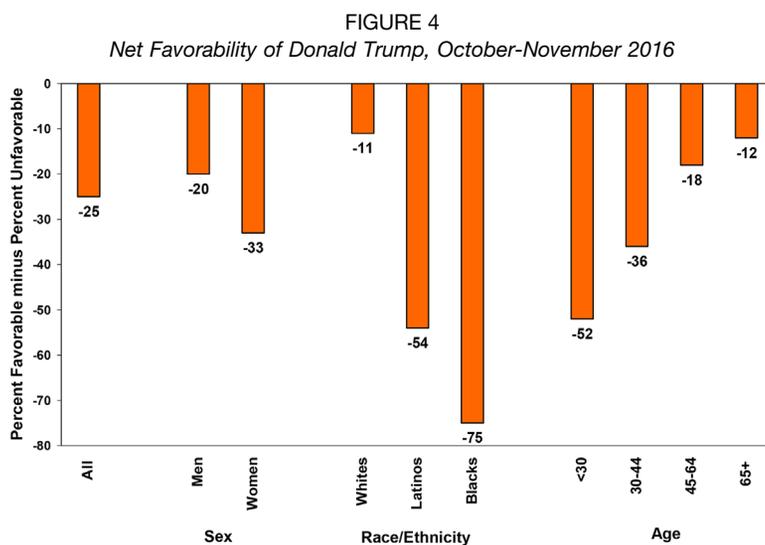
about them.<sup>10</sup> He was notoriously indifferent to truth, repeating bogus claims long after they had been thoroughly debunked; fact checkers had a field day documenting a stream of falsehoods that never let up.<sup>11</sup> His business career had been replete with questionable dealings, bankruptcies stiffing stockholders and suppliers, a phony “university,” and a charitable foundation that dispensed other people’s money.<sup>12</sup>

This record was not lost on the electorate. Surveys taken after Labor Day found that most prospective voters viewed him negatively on a variety of dimensions. As Figure 3 shows, typically more than 60 percent said that he was unqualified, unprepared, and temperamentally unsuited to the presidency. Similar proportions expressed an unfavorable opinion of Trump. Majorities also considered him racist, untrustworthy, crazy, and dangerous, and nearly half said he was corrupt. (Negative opinions of Clinton were much less prevalent on most of these characteristics; I will have more to say about her later.) As the surveys repeated these questions over the

<sup>10</sup>Zeke J. Miller, “Donald Trump Stumbles on Foreign Policy Knowledge in New Interview,” *Time*, 4 September 2015.

<sup>11</sup>“The 2016 Election Fact Checker,” *Washington Post*, accessed at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/2016-election/fact-checker/?tid=a\\_inl](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/2016-election/fact-checker/?tid=a_inl), 6 January 2017; and “Donald Trump’s File,” PolitiFact, accessed at <http://www.politifact.com/personalities/donald-trump/>, 6 January 2017.

<sup>12</sup>Russ Buettner and Charles V. Bagli, “How Donald Trump Bankrupted His Atlantic City Casinos, but Still Earned Millions,” *New York Times*, 11 June 2016; and David A. Fahrentz, “Trump Promised Millions to Charity. We Found Less than \$10,000 over 7 Years,” *Washington Post*, 28 June 2016. Trump University settled a fraud lawsuit for \$25 million after the election.



Source: October-November YouGov polls.

months following the conventions, partisan differences grew appreciably, but the aggregate responses changed very little.<sup>13</sup> On a more positive note, majorities also consistently agreed that Trump was smart, tough, successful, and a hard worker.

*Third*, Trump effectively “insulted his way to the nomination,” attacking not only his elite detractors in both parties and the media but also large segments of the electorate, particularly Latinos and other minorities, as well as making disparaging comments about women, feeding widespread perceptions of bigotry, racism, and misogyny. Offending so many groups helped make Trump the least favorably regarded presidential nominee in the 40 years that surveys have asked the question, earning him an average net favorability rating (percentage viewing him favorably minus the percentage viewing him unfavorably) of  $-30$  in *Economist*/YouGov surveys taken in October and November.<sup>14</sup> On every dimension listed in Figure 3, women, Latinos, and blacks expressed a notably larger proportion of negative opinions of Trump than did whites, especially white men. For example, the data on net favorability in Figure 4 reveal extra-large

<sup>13</sup>The data in Figure 2 are from surveys by *The Economist*/YouGov, ABC News/*Washington Post*, CBS News/*New York Times*, Bloomberg, CNN, Fox News, NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, NBC News/Survey Monkey, Quinnipiac, Monmouth, George Washington-Battleground, Public Religion Research Institute, Pew, Franklin Pierce, and Fairleigh Dickenson. Polls reported at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/pollster/>, <http://www.pollingreport.com/>, and the sponsors' websites during the campaign. The format for most of these questions was “Would you use the words below to describe Donald Trump [Hillary Clinton]?”

<sup>14</sup>The average from 50 other surveys taken during this period was  $-28$ .

favorability deficits for Trump among women, minorities, and younger age cohorts. Trump's lack of appeal to the future electorate represented by minority and younger voters was a major reason Republican leaders dreaded his nomination.

*Fourth*, Trump ignored standard campaign basics, investing little in television advertising or a serious “ground game” during the primaries, relying instead on his celebrity status, visuals from campaign rallies of the converted, and provocative pronouncements and tweets—and the abundant free media coverage they attracted—to reach voters. One close observer of the campaign characterized it as “a twitter account and a plane.”<sup>15</sup> This approach succeeded wonderfully with the Republican primary electorate and continued into the general election, when it was finally joined by a more conventional ground game, mounted mainly by Republican Party organizations, in the swing states. Despite these later efforts, the Trump campaign and its allies spent less than half as much on the election as the Clinton campaign and its allies.<sup>16</sup>

*Fifth*, Trump's party remained badly divided about his candidacy even after he had clinched the nomination. Many senior Republican leaders, including former presidents and presidential candidates, senators, and governors—traditionally prominent convention participants—elected to stay away from Cleveland. Some delegates not reconciled to Trump's nomination sought unsuccessfully to pass a resolution freeing delegates to vote for any candidate. Cruz, given the prime-time speaking spot customarily granted to the second-place candidate in return for endorsing the winner, pointedly declined to endorse Trump, telling Republicans instead to “vote their consciences.” Many establishment Republicans and conservatives continued to oppose Trump after the convention, but most of them were not on any ballot. Republicans on the ticket with Trump were necessarily warier, as we shall see when we review the congressional elections, but even many of them offered at most tepid support for their leader.

## WHY TRUMP NONETHELESS WON THE NOMINATION AND THE ELECTION

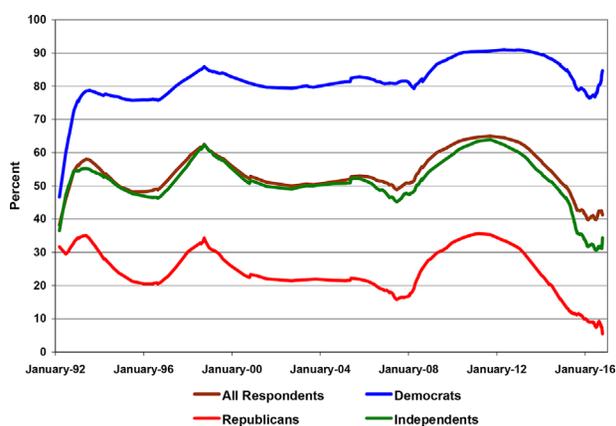
Despite these extraordinary liabilities, Trump won the nomination, never fell far behind in the horse-race polls, and won the election. Why?

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<sup>15</sup>Molly Ball, public comment at the Election Symposium 2016, Madison, Wisconsin, 9 December 2016.

<sup>16</sup>As of 28 November 2016, Clinton's committee and supporting outside groups had reported spending \$687.3 million on the election; the total for Trump was \$306.9 million.

FIGURE 5  
Favorable Opinions of Hillary Clinton, 1992-2016

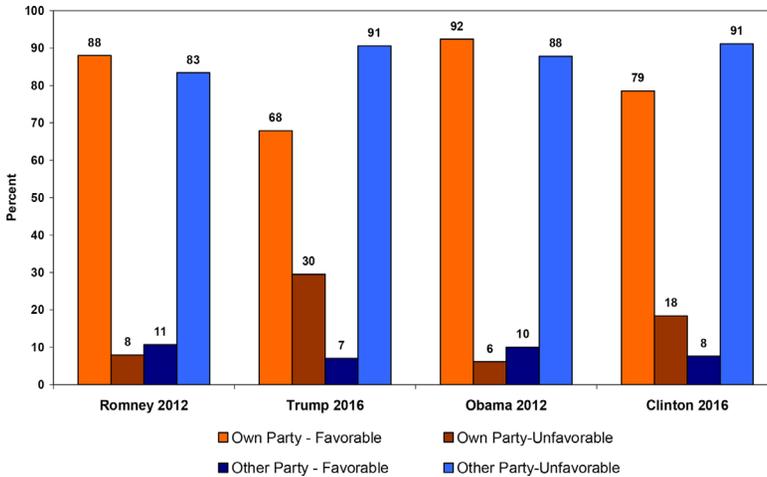


Source: Lowess-Smoothed data from 303 surveys conducted by 15 different survey organizations.

*First*, a majority of Americans also viewed Hillary Clinton very negatively, if not as negatively as Trump. Were it not for Trump, she would have been the most unpopular major-party candidate on record. Clinton became a public figure with the election of her husband in 1992, and her popular standing has varied widely over the ensuing years (Figure 5), as she promoted a controversial health care reform package in 1993, stood by her man during the Monica Lewinsky scandal in 1998, served in the Senate from 2001 to 2008, ran for president in 2008, and served as Barack Obama’s secretary of state from 2009 to 2013. She was viewed quite favorably at the start of her public career and again when weathering her husband’s scandal and impeachment, but she reached her peak while secretary of state; for a time, she was the most popular official in the Obama administration.<sup>17</sup> Opinions of Clinton grew more negative whenever she was directly engaged in electoral politics, and after the middle of 2015, when she had become Obama’s heir apparent, her net favorability rating fell sharply and remained underwater thereafter. Following her July nomination, it averaged –12 in August and –14 in September before recovering a bit to –10 in October and November as Democratic voters finally rallied to her side. Bernie Sanders’s surprisingly formidable challenge had exposed Clinton’s weakness among her partisans, especially younger white liberals; her support among older and minority voters eventually delivered her expected nomination. Although Sanders offered Clinton strong support in his prime-time speech and pleaded with his delegates to join him, not all

<sup>17</sup>In every CNN, CBS News/*New York Times*, and Fox News poll that asked the job approval question about Clinton and another administration figures (Obama, Joe Biden, and other cabinet members;  $N=9$ ), she received the highest approval rating, averaging 65 percent to, for example, Obama’s 51 percent.

FIGURE 6  
*Partisan Opinions of the Candidates, 2012 and 2016*



Source: See footnote 18.

complied. The publication of Democratic National Committee emails (the work of Russian hackers acting at Putin’s behest, according to U.S. intelligence agencies) revealing that its leaders had tilted toward Clinton outraged Sanders supporters, some of whom walked out and joined street demonstrations against her nomination.

By the election year, Clinton had become extraordinarily unpopular among Republicans and, to a lesser extent, independents. Both Clinton and Trump were viewed much more negatively by both their own and rival partisans than Obama and Romney were in 2012 (Figure 6). Not only did 91 percent of rival partisans typically express unfavorable opinions of Clinton and Trump, but for both candidates, an average of 80 percent chose “very unfavorable”; the comparable figures for Obama and Romney were 54 percent and 48 percent, respectively. Clinton and Trump were also both much less popular among independents than their predecessors in 2012; favorability for both averaged about 32 percent (to 60 percent unfavorable) among independents, compared with about 50 percent for both candidates in 2012.<sup>18</sup>

Clinton’s problems with the electorate were, to a considerable extent, self-inflicted. Her extensive use of a private email system for public business, foreign policy mistakes, and secretive relationships with donors to the Clinton Foundation and Wall Street raised questions about her integrity

<sup>18</sup>The 2012 data in Figure 5 are from Gallup, CBS News/*New York Times*, CNN, and Pew surveys; the 2016 data are from Gallup, YouGov, CBS News/*New York Times*, ABC News/*Washington Post*, and Fox News surveys.

and judgment. These liabilities invited relentless attacks by her old nemesis, the “vast right-wing conspiracy” led by Fox News, talk radio, and right-wing bloggers, but they also drew critical, if more restrained, coverage from mainstream news media. The consequences are evident in Figure 3; a larger share of voters viewed her as corrupt compared with Trump, and an equal share viewed her as untrustworthy—the only of these measures on which she did not hold the advantage. Federal Bureau of Investigation director James Comey’s resurrection of the email issue on 28 October evidently reinforced such perceptions; in Gallup’s daily tracking poll, Clinton’s net favorability fell from –11 to –17 between then and the election.<sup>19</sup> The shots from the left from the Sanders campaign took a toll as well, and she came to be viewed as cold, calculating, and self-serving even by many Democrats. The most important message in the survey data, however, lies in the extremely negative views of Clinton held by ordinary Republicans; no matter what they thought of Trump, for the vast majority, Clinton was not an acceptable alternative. In this, they echoed columnist Peter Wehner, quoted at the beginning of this article, who, despite his excoriation of Trump, said he could never vote for Clinton.

*Second*, Republicans’ reluctance to desert Trump for Clinton was reinforced by her status as Obama’s successor. A great many ordinary Republicans have viewed Obama from the beginning as someone whose name, race, upbringing, associations, alleged objectives, and presumed values put him outside the boundaries of what is acceptable in an American leader. The widespread acceptance among Republicans of bogus claims about his birthplace and religion reflects this mind-set. In a survey taken as recently as October 2016, only 45 percent of Republicans said that Obama was U.S. born (28 percent said he was foreign born, the rest pleaded ignorance); 43 percent said he was a Muslim and only 20 percent, a Christian.<sup>20</sup> How firmly these beliefs are held is debatable,<sup>21</sup> but their continuing expression reveals the depth of Republican antipathy toward the president and eagerness to deny his legitimacy. This antipathy has a racial component; numerous studies confirm that racial animus has shaped reactions to Obama since his emergence as a presidential contender and throughout his presidency.<sup>22</sup>

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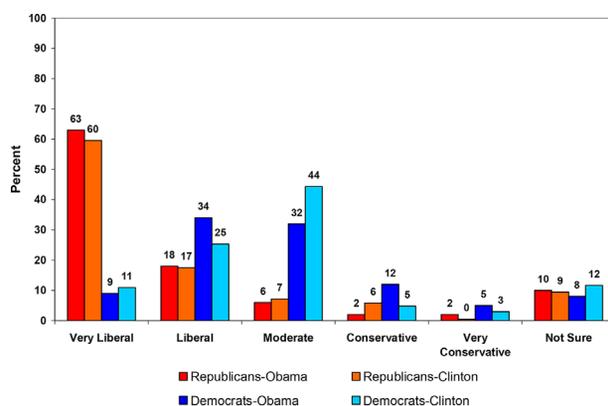
<sup>19</sup>Gallup, “Presidential Election: Key Indicators,” accessed at [http://www.gallup.com/poll/189299/presidential-election-2016-key-indicators.aspx?g\\_source=POLITICS&g\\_medium=topic&g\\_campaign=files#pcf-image](http://www.gallup.com/poll/189299/presidential-election-2016-key-indicators.aspx?g_source=POLITICS&g_medium=topic&g_campaign=files#pcf-image), 5 December 2016.

<sup>20</sup>Data from the 2016 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP) survey, Week 6 (September 29–3 October 2016), analyzed by the author.

<sup>21</sup>John G. Bullock, Alan S. Gerber, Seth J. Hill, and Gregory A. Huber, “Partisan Bias in Factual Beliefs about Politics,” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 10 (December 2015): 519–578.

<sup>22</sup>Jacobson, “Polarization,” 229.

FIGURE 7  
*Partisan Perceptions of Obama's and Clinton's Ideological Location*



Source: Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project survey, Week 4 (September 14-19, 2016), author's analysis.

Disdain for Obama and everything he has done, as well as specious beliefs about his birthplace and religion, were especially prevalent among Trump's supporters,<sup>23</sup> feeding their enthusiasm for a candidate in almost every conceivable way the polar opposite of the president.<sup>24</sup> Reflecting sentiments prevalent in the Republican primary electorate, not only Trump but every Republican candidate in 2016 vowed to undo virtually everything Obama had achieved in domestic and foreign affairs. The idea that a Clinton victory would effectively deliver a third Obama term appalled a large majority of Republicans, who considered her an extreme liberal, just as they had Obama (Figure 7). The modal Democrat, in contrast, pegged her as a moderate; on average, Democrats placed her a bit to the right of Obama, whom they also considered relatively moderate—yet another sign that Republicans and Democrats now tend to live in separate cognitive worlds.<sup>25</sup> During October and November of the election year, an average of 90 percent of Democrats approved of Obama's job performance, making Clinton's association with Obama a major plus among her own partisans. But the

<sup>23</sup>In the four YouGov surveys taken in October 2016, an average of 95 percent of Trump supporters disapproved of Obama's job performance, 83 percent "strongly"; comparable figures for all Republicans were 87 percent and 70 percent, respectively. In the CCAP survey cited in note 20, only 36 percent of Trump supporters acknowledged that Obama was born in the United States—this after Trump had finally admitted that truth—while 34 percent said he was foreign born; 49 percent said he was a Muslim and 13 percent, a Christian.

<sup>24</sup>David Axelrod, "The Obama Theory of Trump," *New York Times*, 25 January 2016.

<sup>25</sup>Ian G. Anson, "Just the Facts? Partisan Media and the Political Conditioning of Economic Perceptions," *Political Research Quarterly* 69 (September 2016): 444-456; Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler, *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012).

opposite was true for the vast majority of Republicans—about 85 percent—who disapproved of Obama’s performance.

*Third*, Trump found a theme and, with it, an enthusiastic constituency that enabled him to take over the Republican Party and thereafter succeeded in bringing most Republican voters who had opposed his nomination into the fold. Trump rose to dominate the crowded primary field (17 candidates at its peak) by mobilizing and exploiting the anti-immigrant, anti-Mexican, anti-Muslim, anti-Obama, and anti-globalization sentiments common among a large faction of ordinary Republicans and not a few independents. His bullying, vulgar, hyperbolic trash talk, unleashed against detractors in both parties and the media, tapped into a rich vein of right-wing populist disdain for cultural, corporate, and political elites, most emphatically including Hillary Clinton. That Trump’s statements were often self-contradictory, wildly misinformed, or flatly untrue, that his fantastic promises were untethered to any discernible reality (for example, to build a 30-foot wall on the entire U.S.–Mexico border and make Mexico pay for it), did not seem to faze his supporters in the least. They were immune from fact-checking by mainstream news sources they did not trust.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, criticism of Trump by the media as well as establishment politicians and intellectuals across the political spectrum probably strengthened his appeal to the angry, disaffected voters susceptible to his message.

A Quinnipiac University Poll taken during the March primary season revealed just how alienated and besieged Trump’s supporters felt compared with the backers of other candidates still in the race at that time (Table 1). It also delineated the diverse sources of their anger and disaffection. Eighty-five percent of the Trump supporters in this survey (43 percent of the Republicans interviewed) agreed with the statement, “America has lost its identity,” 91 percent thought their “beliefs and values were under attack,” and 80 percent believed that “the government has gone too far in assisting minority groups.” The comparable figures for Clinton supporters (50 percent of the Democrats in this survey) were 28 percent, 33 percent, and 15 percent, respectively. Trump’s voters were also more likely to say they were falling behind economically (78 percent compared with 38 percent of Clinton voters), that public officials do not care what they think (88 percent), and that Americans need “a leader who is willing to say or do anything to solve America’s problems” (84 percent). Cruz

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<sup>26</sup>Respondents were asked in a survey taken for the Huffington Post after the election whom they would believe if a mainstream news source reported that Trump said something untrue; 56 percent of Trump voters said they would be more inclined to believe him and 2 percent, the news report (the rest said it would depend). For Clinton voters, the respective numbers were 2 percent, Trump; 52 percent, the report; and 37 percent, it depends.

TABLE 1  
*Opinions of Primary Supporter of Trump, Cruz, Kasich, Sanders, and Clinton, March 2016*  
*(Percentages)*

	Republicans			Democrats	
	Trump	Cruz	Kasich	Sanders	Clinton
Supporters within the party	43	29	16	38	50
America has lost its identify					
Agree	85	79	61	45	28
Agree Strongly	55	38	22	16	10
I feel as though my beliefs and values are under attack in America today					
Agree	91	88	74	45	33
Agree Strongly	76	67	44	19	15
The government has gone too far in assisting minority groups					
Agree	80	76	49	19	15
Agree Strongly	55	41	20	9	6
I feel as though I am falling further and further behind economically					
Agree	78	62	44	61	38
Agree Strongly	46	26	23	32	12
Public officials don't care much what people like me think					
Agree	88	79	65	65	61
Agree Strongly	66	42	38	40	29
What we need is a leader who is willing to say or do anything to solve America's problems					
Agree	84	56	48	42	37
Agree Strongly	54	24	21	17	20

Source: Quinnipiac University Poll, 16–21 March 2016, accessed at <https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2340>.

supporters were the next most disaffected group, followed by Kasich supporters, the most sanguine among Republicans. Sanders's backers were more likely to agree with these statements than Clinton supporters, who were the least inclined to agree with any of them. The average difference on these items between Trump and Clinton supporters was nearly 50 percentage points.

Given Trump's disdain for "losers," a label he had applied liberally to his detractors, it is ironic, although not surprising, that his appeal was strongest among Americans who felt like losers themselves. Trump connected with the substantial minority of Americans who feel besieged economically and culturally by globalism, the growing racial and ethnic diversity of the American population, and changing cultural norms. Cultural factors apparently dominated. An examination of Gallup data comprising more than 110,000 survey respondents, with contextual data specifying where they lived, found, like other surveys, that Trump supporters were less educated, more likely to have blue-collar jobs, older, more religious, disproportionately male, and overwhelmingly white.

Against expectations, however, they were individually no worse off economically than other Americans in similar occupations and were actually less likely to work in industries threatened by foreign competition. But they were more likely to live in areas that are homogeneously white, less cosmopolitan, and further from the Mexican border and that have lower intergenerational mobility, higher mortality rates among middle-aged whites, and a larger proportion of working-age adults receiving disability payments.<sup>27</sup>

Against this background, it is not surprising that Trump supporters shared a deep cultural pessimism; in an August 2016 Pew survey, 81 percent of Trump supporters said that life in America for people like them was worse than it had been 50 years ago, and 68 percent expected it to be even worse for the next generation; the comparable figures for Clinton supporters were 19 percent and 30 percent, respectively.<sup>28</sup> They also shared Trump's disdain for "political correctness,"<sup>29</sup> viewed his vulgarity as authenticity, and were attracted rather than repelled by his authoritarian impulses.<sup>30</sup> They distrust the government and believe that its social programs serve mostly undeserving racial minorities and immigrants rather than people like them. They feel abandoned and marginalized, with no small justification, by national politicians in both parties, the corporate world, and urban sophisticates in the media and entertainment industries.<sup>31</sup> Trump's message of xenophobia and flirtation with white identity politics (a portion of both his fans and critics heard "Make

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<sup>27</sup>Jonathan T. Rothwell and Pablo Diego-Rosell, "Explaining Nationalist Political Views: The Cast of Donald Trump" (working paper, 4 September 2016), accessed at [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2822059](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2822059), 6 January 2017.

<sup>28</sup>Pew Research Center, "Clinton, Trump Supporters Have Starkly Different Views of a Changing Nation," 18 August 2016, accessed at <http://www.people-press.org/2016/08/18/clinton-trump-supporters-have-starkly-different-views-of-a-changing-nation/>, 28 October 2016.

<sup>29</sup>The Quinnipiac Poll of 17–20 November 2016 asked, "Which is closer to your point of view? There is too much political correctness in the United States today. OR, There is too much prejudice in the United States today." Eighty percent of Republicans said too much political correctness, 17 percent, too much prejudice; the respective figures for Democrats were 12 percent and 84 percent. Independents were split evenly. Data accessed at <http://www.pollingreport.com/politics.htm>, 13 December 2016.

<sup>30</sup>*Washington Post*/ABC News Poll, 1–4 August 2016, accessed at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/page/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2016/08/07/National-Politics/Polling/question\\_16697.xml?uuid=m3ykWlxUEaLSAyzRCIRMQ](https://www.washingtonpost.com/page/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2016/08/07/National-Politics/Polling/question_16697.xml?uuid=m3ykWlxUEaLSAyzRCIRMQ), 6 January 2017; Matthew MacWilliams, "The One Weird Trait That Predicts Whether You're a Trump Supporter," *Politico*, 17 January 2016, accessed at <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/donald-trump-2016-authoritarian-213533>, 7 January 2017; and Jonathan Weiler, "Demystifying the Trump Coalition: It's the Authoritarianism," *Huffington Post*, 4 September 2016, accessed at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jonathan-weiler/demystifying-the-trump-co\\_b\\_8089380.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jonathan-weiler/demystifying-the-trump-co_b_8089380.html), 6 January 2017.

<sup>31</sup>Jeff Guo, "A New Theory for Why Trump Voters Are So Angry—That Actually Makes Sense," *Washington Post*, 8 November 2016, accessed at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/11/08/a-new-theory-for-why-trump-voters-are-so-angry-that-actually-makes-sense/?utm\\_term=.0a057fb36b3a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/11/08/a-new-theory-for-why-trump-voters-are-so-angry-that-actually-makes-sense/?utm_term=.0a057fb36b3a), 16 December 2016.

American Great Again” as “Make American White Again”<sup>32</sup>) resonated most strongly among whites without a college education, especially men, among whom he eventually defeated Clinton by an estimated margin of 49 percentage points. And it registered most powerfully in the Rust Belt states of the upper Midwest that were crucial to his Electoral College victory (Figure 1).

*Fourth*, Trump succeeded in expanding his coalition to include Republicans who had not supported him in the primaries and who harbored doubts about his character, qualifications, and suitability for the office of president. Despite exposure of his boasts of sexual assaults on women, which were followed by multiple sexual harassment accusations (all of which he denied),<sup>33</sup> Trump had little difficulty winning over Christian conservatives, who saw him as a flawed but forceful champion of their demand for “religious freedom” and Supreme Court nominees who would reverse decisions legalizing abortion rights and same-sex marriage. They proved willing to give him a pass for his self-celebrated philandering, multiple marriages, questionable faith, and tepid endorsement of their social issue agenda; according to the Exit Poll, white, born-again Christians gave him 81 percent of their votes, with only 16 percent going to Clinton. Perhaps more surprising, a small but significant proportion of Trump supporters were not deterred by seeing him as crazy (13 percent), dangerous (12 percent), unqualified (10 percent), having the wrong temperament (11 percent), corrupt (7 percent), or racist (7).<sup>34</sup> The negative opinions of Trump catalogued in Figure 3 were not necessarily deal breakers because, aside from anything else, he was not Hillary Clinton.

*Fifth*, the 2016 context generally favored a Republican presidential candidate. In the seven postwar elections in which a candidate sought a third presidential term for the same party, only one succeeded (George H.W. Bush in 1988). After eight years, voters are usually ready for change. The economy was growing in 2016, but too slowly to offset the “time for a change” sentiments, and its fruits were still concentrated in the top tier of income groups. Obama was no drag on the Democratic ticket; helped, perhaps, by dissatisfaction with his prospective successors, his job approval ratings rose during the election year to an average of about 55 percent, his

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<sup>32</sup>Kelly J. Baker, “Make America White Again?,” *The Atlantic*, 12 March 2016, accessed at <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/03/donald-trump-kkk/473190>, 6 January 2017; and Charles M. Blow, “Trump: Make American White Again,” *New York Times*, 21 November 2016.

<sup>33</sup>Max Blau, “These Women Have Accused Trump of Sexual Harassment,” *CNN*, 14 October 2016, accessed at <http://www.cnn.com/2016/10/14/politics/trump-women-accusers/index.html>, 6 January 2017.

<sup>34</sup>From *The Economist/YouGov* polls of 22–26 October and 7–8 October 2016, accessed at <https://today.yougov.com/publicopinion/archive/>, 6 December 2016.

highest in seven years. Still, standard “time for a change” models incorporating economic and presidential approval variables gave a generic Republican candidate the advantage.<sup>35</sup> A Republican candidate less flawed than Trump would have been a favorite, but even Trump clearly benefited from the desire for something new. At a time when trust in government was at an all-time low, a large majority of voters (64 percent) thought him more likely than Clinton to “change the way Washington does business.”<sup>36</sup>

## THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION RESULTS

In the end, the candidate with the much less elaborate and expensive campaign, the more divided party, the smaller convention bounce,<sup>37</sup> and the worse debate performances,<sup>38</sup> who was less popular and rated by more voters as unqualified for the office, won the presidency. Trump did so by the narrowest of margins, winning key victories in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin by a total of fewer than 78,000 votes out of the more than 136.5 million cast nationally while losing the popular vote with 46.1 percent to Clinton’s 48.2 percent. This outcome confirmed that in presidential as in House elections, Republicans enjoy a structural advantage arising from a more efficient distribution of their partisans. Democratic voters were overly concentrated in states that Clinton won by large margins—Clinton won California by more than 4 million votes, for example—while Republicans were distributed more evenly across the states. Far fewer of the votes for Trump were “wasted” in lopsided victories, and it was Trump’s ability to win close elections in pivotal states that made the difference.

Postelection polling data suggest several explanations for his success. Figure 8 shows one reason why most observers expected Clinton to win: throughout the entire campaign season, Democrats were readier to vote for her than Republicans were for Trump. But also notice that Republican voters, although more hesitant to support Trump, were not planning to defect to Clinton in significant numbers. On Election Day, most of these

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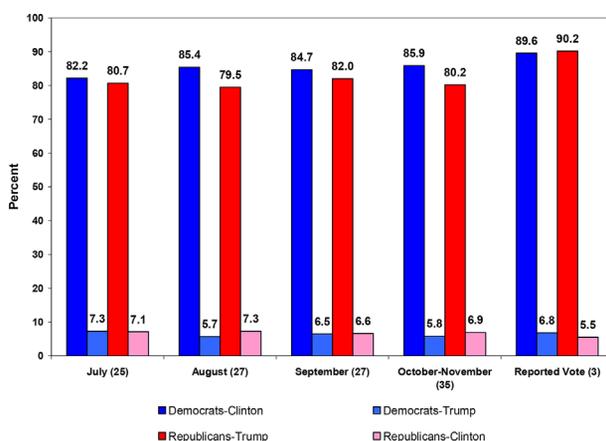
<sup>35</sup>Alan I. Abramowitz, “Forecasting the 2016 Presidential Election: Will Time for Change Mean Time for Trump?,” *Sabato’s Crystal Ball* (blog), 11 August 2016, accessed at <http://www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/forecasting-the-2016-presidential-election-will-time-for-change-mean-time-for-trump/>, 6 January 2017.

<sup>36</sup>Gallup, “Trust in Government,” accessed at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/5392/Trust-Government.aspx>, 7 December 2016; and Bloomberg Poll, 14–17 October 2016, accessed at <https://assets.bwbx.io/documents/users/iqjWHBFdfxIU/rSBkM2tk5hcl/v0>, 6 December 2016.

<sup>37</sup>Steven Shepard, “How Big Is Hillary Clinton’s Convention Bounce?,” *Politico*, 2 August 2016, accessed at <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/how-big-is-hillary-clintons-convention-bounce-226545>, 12 December 2016.

<sup>38</sup>See the surveys covering all three debates at <http://www.pollingreport.com/wh16.htm>, accessed 12 December 2016.

FIGURE 8  
*Partisan Voting Intentions (Monthly Averages)*



Note: The number of surveys averaged is in parentheses.

hesitant Republicans opted for Trump, who ran an average of 9.4 percentage points higher among his own partisans in the postelection surveys than he had in the month before the election; Clinton, by comparison, ran only 4.1 points higher among her partisans in the postelection surveys. These results are consistent with analyses indicating that late-deciding voters went disproportionately for Trump, especially in the swing states.<sup>39</sup>

Trump also won a large majority of voters who had equally positive or negative opinions of both candidates. According to the Exit Poll, voters who thought one candidate was qualified or had the right temperament for the presidency and the other did not voted overwhelmingly (90 percent or more) for the favored candidate. But those who thought both (5 percent to 6 percent) or neither (14 percent) had either of these characteristics went strongly for Trump, with margins ranging from 69–15 to 77–12 across the four possible subgroups. When the candidates were seen as equally good or bad, the desire for change prevailed, and most voters broke for Trump.

The Exit Poll also revealed that Clinton fell short in her efforts to mobilize the Obama coalition for a third election. Although she ran a point better than Obama had in 2012 among white women, she ran 3 points worse among white men and also fell below Obama's totals among African Americans and Hispanics of both sexes. As in 2012, there was a steep age

<sup>39</sup>Aaron Blake, "How America Decided, at the Last Moment, to Elect Donald Trump," *Washington Post*, 17 November 2016, accessed at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/17/how-america-decided-at-the-very-last-moment-to-elect-donald-trump/?utm\\_term=.372c7788484c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/17/how-america-decided-at-the-very-last-moment-to-elect-donald-trump/?utm_term=.372c7788484c), 12 December 2016.

gradient in the vote, with Clinton doing best among the youngest age cohorts; however, she ran behind Obama in every age group except voters 65 and older (which she lost to Trump by 8 points compared with Obama's 12). Clinton thus failed to connect with enough of the remaining electorate to offset her huge deficit among white men, especially those without a college education, and particularly in the Rust Belt regions of the Midwest.

### THE 2016 CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

During this century, deepening partisan divisions have inspired high levels of party-line voting and low levels of ticket-splitting, resulting in thoroughly nationalized, president- and party-centered congressional elections.<sup>40</sup> The unusual circumstances of 2016 raised the question of whether this configuration would persist. The answer was an emphatic yes. In the end, the vast majority of partisans remained loyal to their candidates in the congressional as well as the presidential elections. In a year when an anti-establishment outsider rode into the White House on a wave of anger at the federal government and demand for change in Washington, the congressional elections produced, by historical standards, very little change indeed (Table 2). Only seven House incumbents lost general elections (five others were defeated in primaries, three of them victims of redistricting<sup>41</sup>) and only 12 seats changed party hands, both near postwar lows.<sup>42</sup> Two incumbents senators lost, and theirs were the only Senate seats that changed party hands, again nearly the lowest turnover on record.<sup>43</sup> Despite widespread disgust with Beltway politicians, with an average of 78 percent of Americans disapproving of Congress's performance in polls taken during the election year,<sup>44</sup> people in aggregate voted as if they had been complacently content with their elected representatives in Washington.

It was not obvious before the elections that party loyalty and the status quo would prevail. Both parties were divided, and both presidential candidates were unusually unpopular. One reason so many Republican leaders and pundits had opposed Trump was the fear that his unpopularity would lead to a landslide defeat that would cost them the Senate

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<sup>40</sup>Gary C. Jacobson, "It's Nothing Personal: The Decline of the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections," *Journal of Politics* 77 (July 2015): 861–873.

<sup>41</sup>Court-ordered redistricting occurred in Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia between 2014 and 2016.

<sup>42</sup>The record for the fewest incumbent defeats in House general elections is six (1986, 1988, 1998, and 2000); the postwar average is 23. The only two postwar elections with less partisan turnover were 1988 (nine) and 1968 (11).

<sup>43</sup>In 1990, only one Senate seat changed party hands; in every other postwar election, the number has exceeded two, with an average near seven.

<sup>44</sup>Average of 27 surveys reported at <http://www.pollingreport.com/CongJob.htm>, accessed 13 December 2016.

TABLE 2  
*Membership Changes in the House and Senate, 2014–2016*

	Republicans	Democrats	Independants
<i>House of Representatives</i>			
Elected in 2014	247	188	
Elected in 2016	241	194	
Incumbents reelected	213	168	
Incumbents defeated	6	1	
Open seats retained	25	17 <sup>a</sup>	
Open seats lost	3	2	
<i>Senate</i>			
After the 2014 election	54	44	2 <sup>b</sup>
After the 2016 election	52	46	2 <sup>b</sup>
Incumbents reelected	20	7	
Incumbents defeated	2	0	
Open seats retained	2	3	
Open seats lost	0	0	

Source: Compiled by the author.

a. Includes CA-17, where Democrat Ro Khanna defeated incumbent Democrat Mike Honda.

b. The independents caucus with the Democrats.

and perhaps even the House.<sup>45</sup> Vocal elite opposition continued after he became the nominee, but it was confined largely to Republicans who did not have to face the electorate. Those on the ticket with Trump had a tougher choice, needing the votes of his enthusiastic white downscale supporters but risking the loss of more upscale Republicans and independents, particularly women, if they embraced his candidacy too closely. In the end, however, they largely closed ranks and did not suffer for it. Trump won the electoral if not the popular vote despite his negatives and, if anything, probably helped rather than hurt down-ballot Republicans, for the congressional elections were as partisan, nationalized, and president centered as they had been in 2012.

### *The House Elections*

Republicans lost a net six seats in the 2016 House elections, but this outcome counts as a success because they were defending the 247 seats won in 2014, their highest total since the 1920s. They ended up with only one seat fewer than they had won in their historic sweep in 2010. Their structural advantage in the distribution of voters across House districts<sup>46</sup>—exemplified by the fact

<sup>45</sup>Ben Kamisar, "GOP Memo Says What to Do If Trump Is Nominee," *The Hill*, 2 December 2015, accessed at <http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/261844-report-nrsc-memo-gives-senate-candidates-what-ifs-trump>, 6 January 2017; and Michael Gerson, "Trump Declares War on America's Demography," *Washington Post*, 13 August 2015.

<sup>46</sup>Gary C. Jacobson and Jamie L. Carson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, 9th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 21–23.

TABLE 3  
*District Partisanship and House Election Results, 2016*

<i>District Partisanship</i>	<i>Won by Democrat</i>	<i>Won by Republican</i>	<i>Number of Districts</i>
Democrat > 2	174 (+4)	10 (-4)	184
Republican > 2	7 (-3)	213 (+3)	220
Balanced	13 (+5)	18 (-5)	31
Total	194 (+6)	241 (-6)	435

*Note:* District partisanship is measured by the 2016 presidential vote; Republican districts are those in which the major-party vote for Trump was at least 2 percentage points above his national share; Democratic districts are those where Trump's vote was at least 2 points below that share; those falling in between were the balanced districts. The change from the preelection distribution is shown in parentheses.

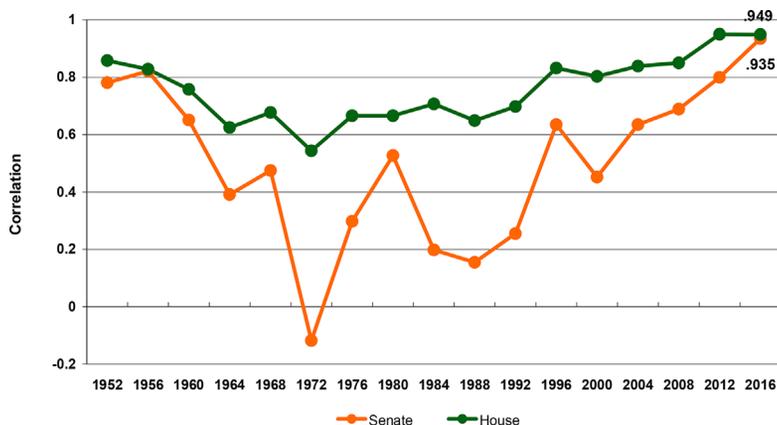
that, despite losing the popular tally by 5 million votes in 2012, Mitt Romney won pluralities in 226 districts compared with Obama's 209—would have protected their majority short of an enormous pro-Democratic tsunami, and of course, none materialized. Remarkably, the results mirrored district partisanship as measured by the vote for Obama in 2012 almost perfectly. Before the election, only 31 seats—7.1 percent of the total—were held by the party whose presidential candidate had lost the district in 2012. After the election, that number was down to 23 (5.3 percent). Trump's disruptive candidacy produced only a small deviation from this pattern, with a total of 35 districts (8.0 percent) delivering split verdicts, and the Republicans' structural advantage persisted; although Trump won 2.86 million fewer votes than Clinton, he won the most votes in 230 districts, Clinton, in 205.

Table 3 presents a more nuanced look at the link between House and presidential voting by dividing districts according to whether Trump's vote was at least 2 points above (Republican districts) or 2 points below (Democratic districts) his national major-party vote share (48.89 percent) or fell somewhere in between (the balanced districts). Only 17 districts were won by the "wrong" party by this definition in 2016, down from 24 before the election. Of the 12 seats that changed party hands, seven were won by the party with a favorable partisan balance, none by a candidate facing an unfavorable balance (the other five changes were in balanced districts). Victories against the partisan grain have become exceedingly rare in this decade and now account for only about 4 percent of House seats. Consistent party-line voting has magnified the advantage that Republicans enjoy from the more efficient distribution of their regular voters across districts, which is again evident in the distribution of districts with a favorable partisan balance (220 for Republicans, 184 for Democrats) in Table 3.

The persistence of an extraordinarily strong relationship between district partisanship and House voting in 2016 is also evident in aggregate voting data. The correlation between the district-level vote share of House and

FIGURE 9

*Correlations between the the Presidential and Congressional Vote at the State and District Levels, 1952–2016*



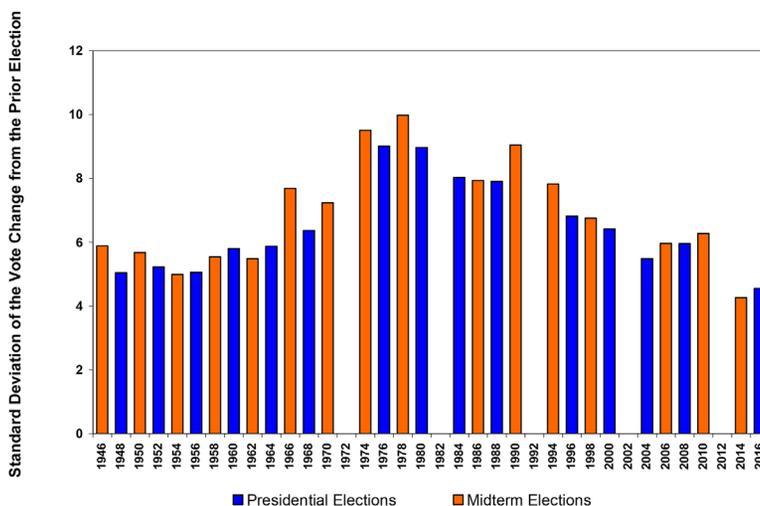
Source: Compiled by author.

presidential candidates has grown substantially since the 1970s (Figure 9). It reached a record high of .95 in 2012 and remained there in 2016; the district-level correlations between the 2012 presidential vote and the 2016 House and presidential votes were .95 and .97, respectively, indicating the persistence of very high levels of partisan electoral coherence in 2016. Moreover, as district partisanship has become such a dominant force, the value of incumbency, measured in vote share, dropped to levels last seen in the 1950s; in 2016, it was less than 2.5 percentage points, far below its average value of about 8 points in the years between the mid-1960s and the early years of the twenty-first century.<sup>47</sup> House incumbents were very successful in 2016, winning 98 percent of their general election contests—not, however, because they were incumbents but rather because they ran in districts that favored their party. Only 20 (5 percent) had to defend seats that favored the rival party; three of them lost, accounting for half of incumbent defeats. District partisanship was also the key to success for candidates running for the 47 open seats. None of them took a district that favored the other party by the measure used here; 96 percent of the winners took districts won by their party’s presidential candidate in 2016.

Survey data also point to partisan coherence nearly as strong as in 2012, when the presidential match-up was far more orthodox. The Exit Poll showed that the high levels of partisan loyalty and low levels of ticket-

<sup>47</sup>Gary C. Jacobson, “Congress: Nationalized, Polarized, and Partisan,” in *The Elections of 2016*, Michael Nelson, ed. (CQ Press, forthcoming); and Gary C. Jacobson, “It’s Nothing Personal: The Decline of the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections.”

FIGURE 10  
*The Nationalization of U.S. House Elections, 1946-2016*



Source: Compiled by author.

splitting evident in recent years largely persisted in 2016. Democrats voted 92–7 for their party’s House candidate, Republicans, 94–5, and the level of ticket-splitting that can be estimated from the Exit Poll remained very low, about 6.8 percent compared with 6.5 percent estimated from the 2012 edition of the poll.

The extreme nationalization of the 2016 House elections is also evident in Figure 10, which displays the standard deviation of the House vote swing from the prior election in stable districts for election years going back to 1946.<sup>48</sup> The smaller the standard deviation, the more uniform the swing across districts, and thus the more nationalized the election. The 2016 swing was, by a clear margin, the most uniform any presidential election year in the entire postwar period, with a standard deviation (4.5 points) less than half the size of its average for the 1970s and 1980s. It is matched in the postwar era only by the equally nationalized 2014 midterm election.

In sum, the highly unorthodox and disruptive Trump candidacy, and all of the intraparty conflict it provoked at the elite level, did nothing to alter the basic—and very strong—links between House and presidential voting that have emerged over the last several decades. Despite their considerable reservations about their nominee, Republican voters did not desert Trump or

<sup>48</sup>The swing is measured by the change in the Democrat’s share of the major-party vote from the previous election in stable districts. From 1972 onward, years ending in 2 cannot be included because almost all of the districts were redrawn; in 1952 and 1962, a sufficient number of districts remained unchanged after reapportionment (184 and 155, respectively) to include in the analysis.

Republican House candidates in significant numbers. Neither did the Democrats' lack of enthusiasm for Clinton inspire them to vote for Trump or House Republicans. Reflecting the affective polarization that has been driving ordinary Republicans and Democrats apart, a deep antipathy toward the other party and its presidential candidate strongly discouraged defection.<sup>49</sup>

### *The Senate*

Democratic leaders hoped, and Republican leaders feared, that Trump's high negatives (see Figure 3) would enable Democrats to regain the Senate majority they had lost in 2014. They were encouraged by the fact that 24 Republican but only 10 Democratic seats were at stake. Seven of the Republican seats were in states won by Obama in 2012, and six of them were listed in Cook's March ratings as being at risk (four toss-up, three leaning Republican).<sup>50</sup> Two Democratic seats were also deemed competitive (one toss-up, one leaning Democratic). Thus, even with only a modest wind at their backs, the Democrats would have a good shot at gaining the four additional seats they would need to control the Senate (assuming they also won the White House and their vice president could break ties). The wind never materialized, the Democrats lost the White House, and Republicans maintained a 52–48 majority after the election.

Polling data showing that large majorities held negative views of Trump had put Republican Senate candidates in competitive states in a bind. Prior to the October 7 surfacing of the 2005 videotape of Trump bragging about his sexual exploits, including groping assaults on women, 28 of the 33 Republican Senate candidates had expressed some level of support for Trump, although with widely varied enthusiasm. Of the remaining candidates, three had already said they would not support him, and two refused to say.<sup>51</sup> After the tape hit the news, virtually all Republican Senate candidates condemned his behavior, but only nine withdrew their support. Three of the nine reverted to backing Trump when the blowback from Trump supporters protesting their apostasy became too intense to resist,

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<sup>49</sup>Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 59 (July 2015): 690–707; Alan I. Abramowitz, "Partisan Nation: The Rise of Affective Partisan Polarization in the American Electorate" (paper presented at the State of the Parties Conference, University of Akron, Akron, OH, 7–8 November 2013).

<sup>50</sup>"2016 Senate Race Ratings for March 25, 2016," *Cook Political Report*, 25 March 2016, accessed at <http://cookpolitical.com/senate/charts/race-ratings/9421>, 6 January 2017.

<sup>51</sup>The three early nonsupporters were Mark Kirk (IL), Mike Lee (UT), and Chris Vance (WA); Kirk and Vance were running in very blue states, but Lee opposed Trump, not popular among Utah Republicans, because of Trump's character and positions. Pat Toomey (PA) refused to say how he would vote until Election Day, when he admitted a vote for Trump. Mark Callahan, a challenger in Oregon, refused to say how he would vote until the end.

eloquent testimony to the cross-pressures Trump's candidacy had put them under.<sup>52</sup> The final patterns of Republican support for Trump clearly reflected strategic considerations. Only five of the 11 Republican candidates (45.4 percent) in contests that the Cook Report classified as competitive (toss-up or leaning to a party) said they would vote for him, compared with 12 of 14 candidates (85.7 percent) in safely red states; the difference is significant ( $\chi^2 = 4.59, p = .032$ ).<sup>53</sup>

In the end, every Republican incumbent who voted for Trump won, while the two who did not support him lost. One of them, Mark Kirk (IL), was in serious electoral trouble and would have lost with or without Trump. However, the other, Kelly Ayotte (NH), was certainly hurt by his candidacy. Already facing a stiff challenge in a state leaning blue, she deserted Trump (whom she had earlier called a "role model") after the videotape surfaced, saying she would write in Republican vice presidential nominee Mike Pence. More important than her vacillation or apostasy, however, was the fact that Clinton won the state. In fact, for the first time in history, *every Senate contest was won by the party that won the state's electoral votes*. The uniqueness of this result is clear from Figure 11. In elections since 1952, the highest previous level of consistency across these offices was 82 percent in 2012. The upward trend is evident, but the jump to 100 percent in 2016 is still remarkable.

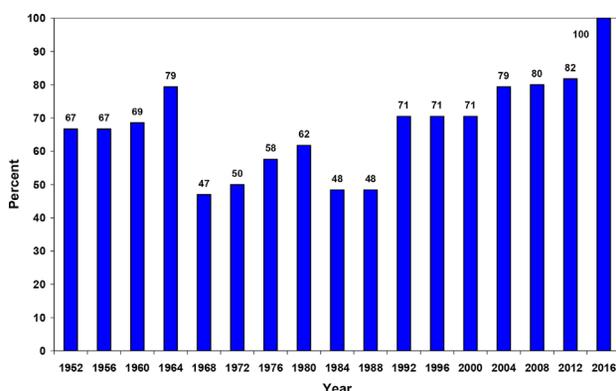
The relationship between the Republican share of major-party votes for president and senator in 2016 is displayed in Figure 12. Notice that the coincidence of voting for both offices tended to be especially close in the tightest contests clustered at the center of the graph; in Nevada, Colorado, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, and North Carolina, the difference between Republican presidential and Senate vote share was no more than one percentage point. Only one close Senate race did not coincide with a close presidential race (Missouri), and only one close presidential race did not coincide with a close Senate race (Florida). Thus, Trump's unexpected wins in Wisconsin and Pennsylvania almost certainly helped Republicans retain control of the Senate, as did his victory in North Carolina, another swing state, while his losses in

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<sup>52</sup>The six who withdrew their support permanently were Lisa Murkowski (AK), John McCain (AZ), Joe Heck (NV), Kelly Ayotte (NH), Rob Portman (OH), and Scott Milne (VT). The vacillators were Darryl Glenn (CO), Mike Crapo (ID), and John Thune (SD).

<sup>53</sup>The same pattern holds if the analysis is confined to the 22 Republican incumbents: 11 of 13 (84.6 percent) in safely Republican states eventually supported Trump, compared with four of nine (44.4 percent) in other states; the difference is again statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 3.96, p = .047$ ). The eight Republicans running in safe Democratic states were freed by their slim prospects to reveal sincere preferences; five supported Trump.

FIGURE 11  
States Won by Same Party in Senate and Presidential Elections, 1952-2016



Source: Compiled by author.

Nevada and New Hampshire probably reduced their margin in that chamber.<sup>54</sup>

The votes shares of Trump and Republican Senate candidates depicted in Figure 12 are correlated at .935, which is the highest such correlation since at least 1952 (Figure 9). In 2016, Senate elections nearly matched the House elections in this regard. By all of these measures, then, the 2016 Senate elections were, like the House elections, thoroughly nationalized, party- and president-centered affairs. They were also enormously expensive, with well over \$1 billion spent on contests for seats in each chamber.<sup>55</sup> Independent spending by parties and nonparty groups continued its upward trend, rising 25 percent above the 2014 totals.<sup>56</sup> A remarkable \$116 million was spent independently to influence the race between Pat Toomey and Kathleen McGinty in Pennsylvania. In lightly populated New Hampshire, the total exceeded \$68 million, and between them the candidates and outside groups spent a whopping \$95 per eligible voter. In six other contests, total outside spending exceeded \$40 million. More than 70 percent of the money spent in the nine most competitive states was deployed by outsiders rather than the candidates' campaigns.<sup>57</sup> Both sides

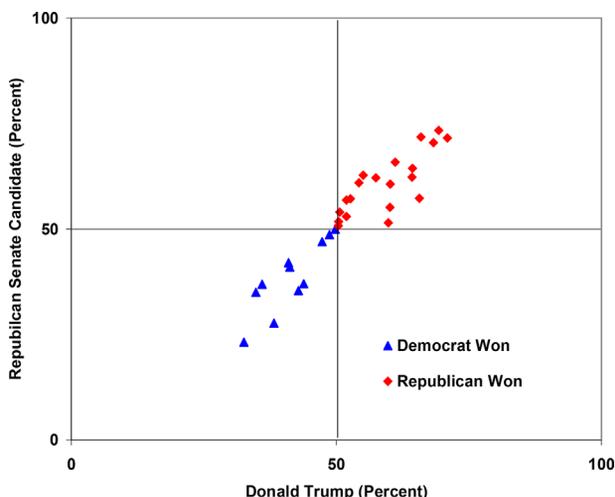
<sup>54</sup>Senate data from California (two Democrats), Louisiana (runoff required), and Alaska (a Libertarian and independent took 44 percent of the vote) are excluded from this figure and the correlation in Figure 6. The Utah presidential vote for Evan McMullin is included in the Republican total for this analysis; McMullin won 21 percent of the vote as an alternative for Republicans who could not accept Trump. The results are insensitive to this choice (the correlation of .93 is unchanged).

<sup>55</sup>Based on extrapolation of data through 16 October on candidate receipts and through Election Day on independent spending.

<sup>56</sup>Campaign Finance Institute, "Independent Spending in Senate Races over \$500 Million," news release, 4 November 2016.

<sup>57</sup>Jacobson, "Congress: Nationalized, Polarized, and Partisan."

FIGURE 12  
*The Vote for President and Senator, 2016*



Source: Compiled by author.

also spent lavishly in competitive House contests, with independent spending exceeding candidate spending in these races. Preliminary spending totals indicate that the average candidate in a close race (outcome in the 55–45 range) was supported by about \$5 million, with winners having a bit more than losers. About 56 percent of the money spent in these races was not under the candidates’ control; more than half was spent independently by the parties, which have now assumed a dominant role in mounting competitive House campaigns.<sup>58</sup>

Did all of this extravagance matter? The election results make it clear that the huge sums expended by outside groups in 2016 did nothing to disrupt basic state or district partisan inclinations or to separate Senate and presidential voting. Indeed, their activities may have reinforced party regularity; according to the state exit polls, both Senate candidates in the tightest and most expensive races inspired higher than average levels of party loyalty, exceeding 90 percent.<sup>59</sup> In most of the close contests, the candidates had nearly equal financial support, and in no case did any competitive candidate fail for lack of funds.<sup>60</sup> This is now typical: in competitive races, both sides have more than ample resources for making their case and mobilizing their supporters, so the balance of resources scarcely matters. The same is true of virtually all potentially competitive House contests. None of this implies that

<sup>58</sup>Ibid; Jacobson and Carson, *Congressional Elections*, 97–101.

<sup>59</sup>State exit poll data may be found at <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/elections/2016/exit-polls>.

<sup>60</sup>Jacobson, “Congress: Nationalized, Polarized, and Partisan,” Table 5.

the campaigns are irrelevant, however. Although the outcomes are largely predictable based on the fundamentals of local partisanship and short-term national trends, campaigns are still necessary to provide voters with the information and motivation that brings the fundamentals to bear on their decisions.<sup>61</sup> Unilateral financial disarmament is never observed because it would be fatal; rather, competitive candidates and their independent allies engage in ever more expensive arms races as each side tries to keep the other from gaining an advantage.

### *Polarization in the 115th Congress*

The elections did nothing to dampen the forces that have fueled party polarization in the House and Senate, which reached record levels in the 113th and 114th Congresses.<sup>62</sup> The incoming party contingents will be representing an even more divergent set of House districts. As Figure 13 shows, the average 28.9 percentage point difference in the underlying partisanship of the districts won by Republicans and Democrats in 2016, clearly exceeded the previous highs reached in 2012 and 2014.<sup>63</sup> Party differences in electoral bases are strongly related to party differences in presidential support and roll call voting, so this gap suggests that the House will be at least as polarized along party lines in the 115th Congress as its recent predecessors.<sup>64</sup> States tend to be more diverse politically and less lopsided in their partisanship than House districts, so the gap between the Senate parties' electoral constituencies is always narrower than in the House, but it nonetheless reached a record high of 18.8 percentage points in 2016 (Figure 14). The number of senators representing states won by their party's candidate in the most recent presidential election reached another postwar high after 2016 and now stands at 86, up from 84 after 2014 and 79 after 2012.

## PROSPECTS FOR THE TRUMP PRESIDENCY

The 2016 elections were at least as polarizing the 2012 elections, but not in exactly the same way. Divisions in the newly elected Congress will follow now-familiar fault lines, with Democrats and Republicans far apart on the same wide range of issues that have separated the parties for years, fueling gridlock and stalemate in Congress whenever either party can block the action. Without

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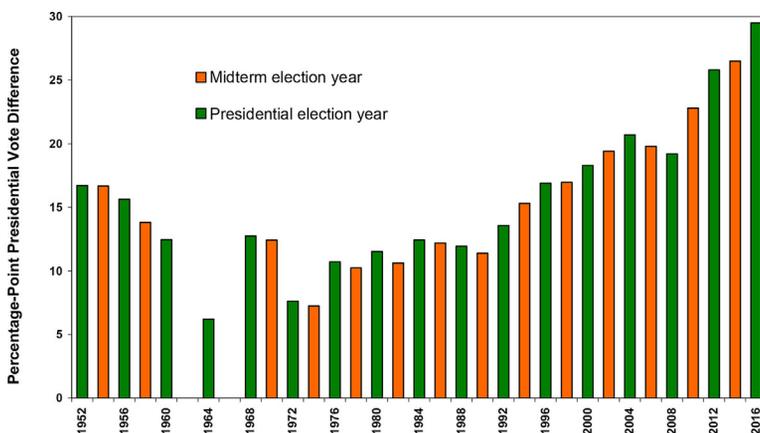
<sup>61</sup>Gary C. Jacobson, "How Do Campaigns Matter?," *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (May 2015): 31–47.

<sup>62</sup>"House and Senate Means, 1879–2016 (as of October 2016)," *Voteview Blog*, 18 November 2016, accessed at <https://voteviewblog.com/>, 23 November 2016.

<sup>63</sup>The average major-party vote for Trump was 61.3 percent in districts won by Republicans, and 32.4 percent in districts won by Democrats in 2016.

<sup>64</sup>Gary C. Jacobson, "Partisan Polarization in Presidential Support: The Electoral Connection," *Congress and the Presidency* 30 (Spring 2003): 8–11.

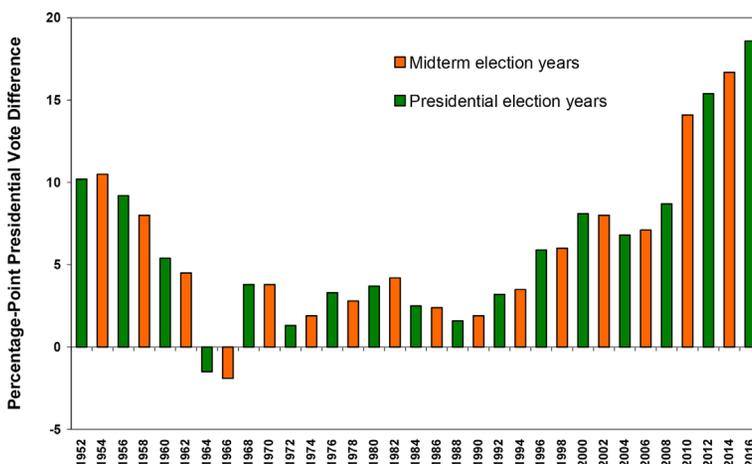
FIGURE 13  
*The Polarization of U.S. House Districts, 1952-2016*



Note: Entries are the percentage-point differences in the average presidential vote between districts won by Democrats and districts won by Republicans; data for 1962 and 1966 are unavailable because of redistricting; entries for midterm elections are calculated from the previous presidential election; the data for 2016 are based the 391 districts with currently available data.  
 Source: Compiled by author.

Obama to check them, congressional Republicans will be freer to pursue their goal of undoing his achievements on health care, financial regulation, consumer protection, tax policy, immigration, and environmental protection and substituting their own preferred policies. They will also be freer to erode

FIGURE 14  
*The Polarization of State Constituencies, 1952-2016*



Note: Entries are the percentage-point differences in the average presidential vote between states won by Democrats and states won by Republicans in the Senate elections; entries for midterm election years are calculated from the presidential election two years earlier.  
 Source: Compiled by author.

abortion and labor rights and weaken the social safety net. A common characteristic of most of these goals is that they are shared by Republican majorities but opposed by majorities of the population and very large Democratic majorities. This includes plans for tax cuts, deregulation of various kinds, walling off Mexico, reversing *Roe v. Wade*, and repealing the Affordable Care Act (Table 4). Given the clear preferences of their supporting coalition, congressional Democrats will have every reason to resist all of these initiatives vigorously, and any Republican successes are sure to anger Democrats, leaders and constituents alike.

The Trump presidency is likely to divide the public for additional reasons. Insofar as his agenda matches the congressional Republican wish list, it is beset by the partisan divisions already mentioned. A few of his agenda items are broadly popular and have bipartisan appeal, notably, a major increase in spending on infrastructure and curbs on free trade (Table 4), but most do not. How eager Trump will be to pursue those objectives that excite his core supporters but remain unpopular outside Republican precincts remains to be seen; he quickly abandoned campaign pledges to prosecute Hillary Clinton, ban all Muslim immigrants, and take immediate steps to expel all of the estimated 11 million undocumented U.S. residents, any of which would have been extremely divisive. Trump's craving for popular adulation may deter him from keeping his most controversial and least broadly popular promises, although doing so might eventually erode his support among the kind of people who cheered for them so loudly at his rallies.

Trump's initial appointees for cabinet and White House offices advisers, on the other hand, portend a thoroughly partisan and divisive administration. His choices to head the Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, and Justice are all on record opposing important components of their agencies' traditional missions and disparaging their clienteles. Trump's choices for Treasury, Commerce, and the Small Business Administration are billionaires who, like him, would benefit handsomely from his proposed tax cuts and regulatory reforms. His nominee to lead the Environmental Protection Agency is a climate change skeptic, as is his choice to head the Department of Energy, who as a presidential candidate in 2012 proposed abolishing that agency. All of his nominees for positions having anything to do with energy policy have strong ties to the oil, gas, and coal industries and have opposed Obama's efforts to reduce greenhouse gases and other forms of pollution. Trump's prospective secretary of state, the head of Exxon, underlines the ascendancy of the carbon-based energy sector in his administration. Although some other nominees enjoy considerable bipartisan respect (those slated to lead Defense,

TABLE 4  
*Public Support for the Republican Agenda*

	<i>All</i>	<i>Republicans</i>	<i>Democrats</i>	<i>Independents</i>
1. Lower taxes on the wealthy				
Favor	29	53	12	23
Oppose	67	40	87	72
2. Cut taxes across board even if deficit increases				
Favor	32	45	20	34
Oppose	60	47	72	58
3. Tax cuts for wealthy will improve the economy and create more jobs				
Yes	38	56	19	37
No	57	37	79	53
4. Should there be more regulation of financial institutions?				
Yes	46	26	66	46
No, hurts economy	43	64	23	43
5. Remove regulations on businesses and corporations				
Favor	38	66	9	39
Oppose	48	21	77	48
6. Remove specific regulations intended to combat climate change				
Favor	31	53	14	28
Oppose	59	35	80	61
7. Build a wall on the Mexican border				
Favor	42	76	11	43
Oppose	57	20	88	53
8. Dealing with illegal immigrants:				
Allow to stay, route to citizenship	60	38	83	56
Allow to stay, no route to citizenship	12	12	7	15
Require to leave	25	45	8	24
9. Suspend immigration from “terror prone” regions				
Favor	50	78	23	48
Oppose	44	18	70	45
10. Renegotiate trade deals				
Favor	64	81	41	67
Oppose	28	13	47	27
11. Increase infrastructure spending				
Favor	83	83	84	83
Oppose	15	17	15	12
12. Opinion of Roe v. Wade decision				
Agree	67	39	85	72
Disagree	30	56	14	24
13. Affordable Care Act				
Repeal	39	76	17	35
Keep as is	39	6	21	17
Expand	15	14	53	44

*Source:* Items 1–12: Quinnipiac Poll, 17–20 November 2016, accessed at <https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=240>; item 13: Pew Survey, 30 November 30–5 December 2016, accessed at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/12/08/partisans-on-affordable-care-act-provisions/>.

Transportation, Homeland Security, and the Central Intelligence Agency, for example), most promise exactly what Democrats imagined and feared from a Trump administration: indifference to the civil rights of minorities, hostility to Muslims and immigrants, a weakened social

safety net, greater environmental damage on local, national, and global scales, and greater economic inequality.

Similar appointments, at least in terms of ideology and policy goals, could have been expected from almost any of the leading Republican candidates in 2016. But Trump has also chosen as his closest White House advisers Stephen Bannon, the former manager of a conservative news and commentary website that served as an outlet for white nationalist, anti-Semitic, xenophobic, and misogynist tracts,<sup>65</sup> and Michael Flynn, a retired general who traffics in conspiracy theories and has characterized Islam as not a religion but a political ideology that has metastasized into a “malignant cancer.”<sup>66</sup> These choices are highly divisive in a particular way, aligning squarely with one side of a growing cultural divide reflecting the parties’ divergent demography. Partisan splits along the dimensions of race and ethnicity, age, education, gender, region, religiosity, and social values continued to widen in 2016; urban–rural differences also increased noticeably.<sup>67</sup> As America has become more diverse ethnically and racially, whites, especially those of lower educational attainment, have responded by becoming more conservative and Republican, while racial and ethnic minorities and the highly educated have remained disproportionately liberal and Democratic. Racial and ethnic differences are now arguably more potent drivers of political division than any other demographic characteristics.<sup>68</sup> These trends predate Trump’s candidacy, but it magnified them, and his presidency as it has developed so far promises to extend them further. His welcoming of white nationalists and hard-line anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant voices into his coalition and administration has already provoked street protests by people who see his victory and its implications as dire threats to them and their communities. The election left a much larger group of fearful and embittered losers than usual, and Trump’s initial actions did little to reassure them.

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<sup>65</sup>For a sampling, see “Breitbart News’ Worst Headlines,” Media Matters, 17 August 2016, accessed at <http://mediamatters.org/blog/2016/08/17/breitbart-news-worst-headlines/212467>, 14 December 2016.

<sup>66</sup>Matthew Rosenberg and Maggie Haberman, “Michael Flynn, Anti-Islamist Ex-General Offered Security Post, Trump Aide Says,” *New York Times*, 17 November 2016, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/18/us/politics/michael-flynn-national-security-adviser-donald-trump.html>, 14 December 2016.

<sup>67</sup>Pew Research Center, “The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart,” 13 September 2016, accessed at <http://www.people-press.org/2016/09/13/the-parties-on-the-eve-of-the-2016-election-two-coalitions-moving-further-apart/>, 12 December 2016; and Lazaro Gamio, “Urban and Rural Americans Are Becoming Increasingly Polarized,” *Washington Post*, 17 November 2016, accessed at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/2016-election/urban-rural-vote-swing/>, 21 November 2016.

<sup>68</sup>Marissa Abrajano and Zoltan L. Hajnal, *White Backlash: Immigration, Race, and American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); and Pew Research Center, “The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election.”

Trump's performance as president-elect reiterated prominent features of his campaign, including mass rallies, absurd self-serving falsehoods (for example, that 3 million fraudulent voters gave Clinton her popular vote margin), tweets trashing his critics in politics and entertainment, rejection of inconvenient information (for example, denigrating the intelligence community's consensus that Russian hackers were behind leaked DNC emails until presented with overwhelming confidential evidence), and little effort to remedy his ignorance of foreign and domestic issues (not bothering with regular intelligence briefings). In short, much of what Trump did as president-elect served to remind Clinton's voters and his critics in politics and the news media why they had so strongly opposed his candidacy. In a Gallup Poll taken immediately after the election, a record low of only 10 percent of partisans on the losing side expressed a favorable opinion of the president-elect; Trump's favorability ratings among Republicans shot up after he won, creating a substantially larger partisan favorability gap than inspired by any of his three predecessors during the equivalent postelection period.<sup>69</sup> A month later, Gallup reported that only 17 percent of Democrats approved of how he was handling the transition; the comparable figures among rival party identifiers for Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama were 50 percent, 46 percent, and 53 percent, respectively; consequently, the partisan gap in approval for Trump's transition of 69 percentage points was much larger than for any of his three predecessors (33 percent, 47 percent, and 40 percent, respectively).<sup>70</sup> If Trump continues to govern as he campaigned, he seems destined outdo even his record-setting predecessors, Bush and Obama, as a divider of Americans. Only if ordinary Republicans sour on him, as they eventually soured on Bush, is the partisan gap in opinions of Trump likely to diminish. The crux here is likely to be jobs: Trump will have to deliver at least a plausible prospect of revival in economically stressed sectors and states to satisfy his core constituency.

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<sup>69</sup>Trump received 82 percent favorable ratings from Republicans and 10 percent from Democrats, a difference of 72 points. The comparable figures for Obama in 2008 were 35 percent, 95 percent, and 60 percent, respectively; for George W. Bush in 2000, they were 93 percent, 31 percent, and 62 percent; and for Bill Clinton in 1992, they were 25 percent, 88 percent, and 63 percent. See Jeffrey M. Jones, "Trump's Favorability Up, but Trails Other Presidents-Elect," Gallup Report, 17 November 2016, accessed at [http://www.gallup.com/poll/197576/trump-favorability-trails-presidents-elect.aspx?g\\_source=Politics&g\\_medium=newsfeed&g\\_campaign=tiles](http://www.gallup.com/poll/197576/trump-favorability-trails-presidents-elect.aspx?g_source=Politics&g_medium=newsfeed&g_campaign=tiles), November 23, 2016.

<sup>70</sup>Jeffrey M. Jones, "Trump's Transition Approval Lower than Predecessors," Gallup Report, 14 December 2016, accessed at [http://www.gallup.com/poll/199352/trump-transition-approval-lower-predecessors.aspx?g\\_source=Politics&g\\_medium=newsfeed&g\\_campaign=tiles](http://www.gallup.com/poll/199352/trump-transition-approval-lower-predecessors.aspx?g_source=Politics&g_medium=newsfeed&g_campaign=tiles), 14 December 2016; in the January 2017 Quinnipiac Poll, the gap was up to 75 points, with 85 percent of Republican but only 10 percent of Democrats approving of his transition; accessed at <https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2415>, 11 January 2017.

On the congressional side, the parties' demographic profiles now echo, in an almost comically exaggerated way, some of the key demographic differences between their electoral coalitions. The House and Senate Republicans in the 115th Congress are 91 percent male, 95 percent white, and 99 percent Christian; none admits to being other than heterosexual. Altogether, 86 percent are straight white Christian men. Congressional Democrats, in contrast, are 32 percent female, 37 percent minority, and 17 percent other than Christian; seven are openly gay; only 36 percent are straight white Christian men. Thus, party demographics are yet another reason to expect the 115th Congress to be at least as polarized as the one it replaces. The difference, of course, is that a unified Republican government is now in place. If congressional Republicans find common ground with Trump and stick together, they can override any Democratic opposition (the filibuster notwithstanding or perhaps not surviving); polarization will no longer breed gridlock. But Democrats are now free to indulge in responsibility-free opposition of the kind perfected by Republicans during the Obama years, while Republicans will bear the full credit or blame for the government's performance. Their fates, for better or worse, will be in the unpredictable hands of Donald Trump, for the nationalization of electoral politics has made it exceedingly difficult for the president's partisans in Congress and elsewhere to escape his shadow.<sup>71</sup> The Republicans' formidable structural advantages—in Senate as well as House elections<sup>72</sup>—will be hard for Democrats to overcome, but the 2006 and 2008 elections showed what is possible when enough voters become fed up with a Republican regime. Trump's victory in 2016 was a necessary, if far from sufficient, condition for a Democratic takeover of Congress in 2018 or 2020. What happens will depend on how well Trump's bizarrely unconventional performance wears over time and whether the changes in domestic and foreign policy that he and his congressional allies actually deliver, and the domestic and international conditions that follow, turn out to be what most Americans actually want.

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<sup>71</sup>Gary C. Jacobson, "Obama and Nationalized Electoral Politics in the 2014 Midterm," *Political Science Quarterly* 130 (Spring 2015): 1–26; and Steven Rogers, "National Forces in State Legislative Elections," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 667 (September 2016): 207–225.

<sup>72</sup>Jacobson and Carson, *Congressional Elections*, 283–284.