Explaining Donald Trump's Political Ascendancy

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The Republican Party finds itself in an interesting conundrum. The good news is that conservative voters are energized. In Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina and Nevada, voter turnout was larger than expected. This bodes well for the party's hopes to retake the White House and to protect its control over Congress. The bad news is that a majority of voters have largely supported two anti-establishment candidates: Donald Trump, the famous New York businessman, and Texan Senator Ted Cruz. And to make matters worse, Trump is today the undisputed frontrunner.

Will Trump win the nomination? It is too early to say. But, what is clear is that unless Trump's rivals can change the dynamics of the race, he should be able to secure enough delegates to win the nomination in the coming three weeks. What has been Trump's secret to success? I analyze the entrance polls conducted in the Iowa and Nevada caucuses and the exit polls conducted in the New Hampshire and South Carolina primaries to explain Trump's ascendancy in the nomination contest.

While Trump finished second in the Iowa caucus, his resounding victories in New Hampshire, South Carolina and Nevada demonstrate that his message is not geographically bound. His success in these three states points to four key observations. First, he has built a broad-based coalition. Second, Trump's message of economic populism seems to resonate with lower income voters, who are anxious with current economic trends. Third, Trump has been able to exploit the anger of voters with the *status quo* and of those who are frustrated with the Republican establishment. Fourth, Trump has recognized voters' fears of terrorism and other global threats, tailoring his message to address these feelings of insecurity.

A Broad Based Coalition

Trump has assembled a broad-based coalition that largely reflects the Republican Party's main voting groups. Unlike the Democratic nomination contest, which has been split along generational lines, with Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders winning the youth vote and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton winning older voters, Trump's constituency has drawn supporters from all age groups. His disparaging comments on women have not seemed to hurt him. While Cruz won a plurality of Iowa's women's vote, Trump's performance with women has improved dramatically since then, winning a plurality of women voters in the other contests.

In the entrance/exit polls, respondents were asked to describe their ideological leanings using one of these choices: "very conservative", "somewhat conservative" and "moderate". These categories roughly represent the Republican Party's main ideological groupings and Trump's message has resonated with many voters in each of these groups.

Table 1 uses the results of the four entrance/exit polls to calculate a weighted average of all the casted votes to estimate each candidate's level of support in these ideological groupings.

Table 1. Weighted Average of All Votes Cast Along Ideological Lines

	Trump	Rubio	Cruz	Kasich
Very Conservative (36% of all votes)	31%	24%	23%	3%
Somewhat Conservative (45%)	36%	20%	11%	7%
Moderate (18%)	38%	16%	6%	16%

Explaining Donald Trump's Political Ascendancy

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These numbers indicate that Trump and Florida Senator Marco Rubio have wide-ranging appeal within these groups. If the current trends continue, it will be very difficult for Cruz or John Kasich, the Ohio Governor, to compete in future contests as Cruz tends to do better with "very conservative" voters and Kasich's voters tend be more moderate.

Most analysts, before the start of the nomination race, expected Cruz to win the majority of the evangelical vote. As documented in Table 2, Christian evangelicals represented a substantial number of voters in Iowa and South Carolina. While Trump lost this vote by a big margin in Iowa, in the other contests he has won a plurality of these votes.

Table 2. Breakdown of the Evangelical & Non-Evangelical Vote Per State

	Trump	Rubio	Cruz	Kasich
Iowa Yes (64%)	22%	21%	34%	1%
No (36%)	29%	26%	18%	4%
New Hampshire Yes (25%)	27%	13%	23%	11%
No (75%)	38%	10%	8%	18%
South Carolina Yes (72%)	33%	22%	27%	5%
No (28%)	30%	22%	13%	19%
Nevada Yes (40%)	40%	23%	26%	2%
No (60%)	50%	24%	18%	5%

For many years, South Carolina's exit polls for the Republican primary have asked respondents whether they have "military experience". Thus, Republican presidential candidates spend a lot of time courting this vote. Like other Republican candidates, Trump promised to increase defense spending. But he also angered many Republicans when he remarked in a televised debate a few days before the primary that President George W. Bush lied about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program to convince Americans to support the invasion. Adding more fuel to the fire, Trump attacked the former president for failing to thwart the attacks of 11 September 2001. Despites these statements, he won 35% of the "military vote", while Rubio received 23% to Cruz's 21%.

Trump's views on immigration are well known. Yet, in Nevada, the first state in the nomination schedule with a substantial non-white, conservative electorate, Trump won 45% of the Hispanic vote. Remarkably, Rubio, who is a son of Cuban immigrants, captured 28% of Hispanic voters, while Cruz, whose father is Cuban, only got 18%. It is important not to exaggerate this finding. Hispanics only represented 8% of the entrance poll's sample and it is highly unlikely that many Hispanics would support Trump in the general election. But, the fact that Trump got some support within this community after vilifying illegal Mexican immigrants raises the question as to whether his economic message is attracting the support of some minority voters.

Addressing Voters' Economic Anxiety

So far, voters' top issue is the economy and jobs, closely followed by government spending. Many voters are anxious about the nation's economy. The New Hampshire and South Carolina exit polls demonstrate that Trump has attracted votes from different income groups, but he has done especially well with "blue-collar" workers and middle class Americans who make $100,000 or less.

It is important to note that the Iowa and Nevada entrance polls did not ask respondents to identify their level of income. But, all the entrance and exit polls did request respondents to divulge their highest level of education. Given the relationship between income and education attainment, we can use these figures to assess who are Trump's core supporters.

Table 3. Weighted Averages of All Voters' Education Background

	Trump	Rubio	Cruz	Kasich
High School or less (15%)	44%	15%	22%	3%
Some college (33%)	40%	16%	22%	6%
College graduate (33%)	31%	22%	20%	9%
Postgraduate (19%)	25%	25%	17%	11%

Although Trump draws voters with different education backgrounds, his core supporters tend to be individuals who have not completed a bachelor's degree. Many of these voters have been directly impacted by many of the neoliberal policies that both Democrats and Republicans have favored since the early 1980s. These findings

Explaining Donald Trump's Political Ascendancy
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demonstrate that "blue-collar" workers have strongly backed Trump's candidacy, which raises the following question: why are these "blue-collar" workers backing the candidacy of a New York billionaire?

Although Trump's plans are short in details, he has not been afraid to challenge Republican dogma on economic issues. For instance, during the debates, Trump has repeatedly promised to renegotiate existing trade agreements and to penalize American companies that move jobs overseas.

In line with other Republican candidates, Trump has proposed a tax cut that will benefit lower income American, middle class families and the very rich. But to balance the expected shortfall in revenue, Trump has stated that he would close loopholes that favor the rich and impose new taxes on Wall Street.

Trump also has vowed to protect welfare entitlements from future spending cuts. On healthcare, Trump has pledged to replace the Obama administration's Affordable Healthcare Act (ACA) with a new plan, which may include what Republicans hate the most about the ACA – an individual mandate that requires all Americans to purchase health insurance.

Of course, Trump's plans are gobbledygook. His numbers, as *The Economist* recently documented, do not add up. While his critics are right to challenge his proposal, the fact of the matter is that Trump's assurance to preserve Social Security, expand health care, and reverse the ills of economic globalization is in line with his supporters' wishes. For years, the Republican establishment has talked about these voters' concerns, but Republican politicians have supported neoliberal policies that favored the private sector and rich Americans, while augmenting income inequality. Trump's presidential hopes have shaken the core principles that define contemporary American economic conservatism and a large number of voters, though not a majority, have sided with Trump in this debate.

Exploiting Voters' Anger and Frustration

Trump (and Cruz to a lesser extent) has exploited voters' anger and frustration with the *status quo*. The following table captures voters' anger towards the federal government, which many conservative voters associate with the Obama administration, its liberal policies and the high level of partisanship that has dominated national politics since the passing of the ACA. The entrance/exit polls asked respondents to choose among four choices: "Enthusiastic", "Satisfied", "Dissatisfied" and "Angry". A very small percentage of respondents selected the first two options. Thus, the table below only includes the other two choices.

Table 4. Feelings about the federal government   Iowa New Hampshire South Carolina Nevada *D*

(49%) A

(42%) D

(50%) A

(39%) D

(52%) A

(40%) D

(36%) A

(59%) Trump 21% 30% 31% 44% 25% 44% 43% 48% *Cruz* 26% 32% 10% 15% 23% 24% 16%

Explaining Donald Trump's Political Ascendancy
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25% *Rubio* 25% 18% 9% 10% 26% 16% 31% 19% *Kasich* 2% 1% 21% 9% 9% 6% 5% 2%
Note: D stands "Dissatisfied" and A for "Anger".

The angry voter phenomenon, or what Alan Abramovitz and Steven Webster call "negative partisanship", is not new to American politics. But what is interesting in this election cycle is that conservative voters' anger is not only at Democrats but it extends to Republican leaders as well. The next table summarizes respondents' answers to a question included in the New Hampshire and South Carolina exit polls: "Do you feel betrayed by Republican politicians?"

Table 5. Do you feel betrayed by Republican Politicians   New Hampshire South Carolina   *Yes (47%) No (51%) Yes (52%) No (45%) Trump* 37% 35% 36% 30% *Cruz* 15% 9% 23% 18% *Rubio* 8% 14% 19% 28% *Kasich* 15% 16% 8% 5%

Taken together, these two tables support three findings.

First, angry voters, as Abramovitz and Webster's research maintains, are passionate participants in the electoral process. It is important to remember that Trump's campaign seems to be less sophisticated than his rivals' in terms of its ability to identify supporters and get them out to vote. But his ability to connect with these voters makes up for this organizational weakness and this is an important element in his political ascendancy.

Second, voter turnout in the Republican caucuses and primaries has been higher than expected. Polling experts have argued that many of these voters are either irregular voters or new to the process. Some research shows that many of these first-time voters are angry or dissatisfied with the *status quo*. Trump has done very well with these irregular voters and first-time voters. For instance, the New Hampshire exit poll found that 15% of voters had never participated in the primary and 38% of these primary-goers voted for Trump.

Third, tables 6 and 7 demonstrate that Trump's total share of the vote increases when he successfully attracts the support of voters who are angry with the federal government and who are frustrated with Republican politicians. As the next tables demonstrate, these voters are not concerned about Trump's potential electability.

Table 6. Weighted Average of Voters' Top Candidate Quality Trump Rubio Cruz Kasich
Electability (18% of the voter) 28% 42% 14% 7% *Share My Values (36%)* 16% 21% 33% 10%
Tells It Like It Is (19%) 73% 12% 7% 3% *Can Bring Change (26%)* 43% 13% 18% 9%

His core supporters are backing his candidacy because they feel he is the only candidate who is

willing to "tell it like it is". Many of his supporters also believe that he "can bring change". Thus, authenticity outdoes electability. To put it in perspective, in the 2012 South Carolina primary exit poll 45% of respondents identified electability as their "top candidate quality". In 2016, electability was only important for 15% of primary-goers.

Voter anger and frustration are so strong this year that a plurality of voters in Iowa and South Carolina and majority of them in New Hampshire and Nevada prefer a candidate who comes "outside the establishment" to a candidate who is "experienced in politics".

Table 7. Voters' Preferences for an Experienced Politician or an Outsider

	Iowa		New Hampshire		South Carolina		Nevada	
	Exp. (46%)	Out (48%)	Exp. (44%)	Out (50%)	Exp. (47%)	Out (48%)	Exp. (32%)	Out (61%)
Trump	3%	46%	6%	62%	4%	63%	5%	70%
Rubio	39%	7%	17%	5%	38%	9%	53%	8%
Cruz	35%	20%	14%	10%	29%	13%	32%	15%
Kasich	4%	0%	27%	6%	11%	3%	8%	1%

Note: "Exp." stands for "Experienced in Politics" and "Out" equals "Outside the Establishment".

As table 7 shows, this attitude has benefited Trump over his rivals and it is one of the reasons that his campaign has done so well in these nomination contests. The fact that Trump is self-financing his campaign also plays well with voters who are frustrated with the Republican establishment, as they believe that Trump will fight for their interests rather than those of corporate America.

Acting on Voters' Fears

While many of Trump's supporters feel a sense of profound sense of economic anxiety, many more are extremely fearful of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and the possibility that the terrorists will attack the United States. Terrorism is third most important issue this election cycle, following the economy and government spending.

Trump's ascendancy in public opinion surveys paralleled the November Paris terrorist attacks and the subsequent shootings in San Bernardino, California. In reaction to these attacks, Trump proposed a "total and complete" ban on Muslims entering the United States. Although his rivals and Republican leaders were quick to condemn his plan, Trump never backed away from it. Actually, it became of key part of hi stump speech and it was prominently featured in this first television ad. Over time, Trump has soften his rhetoric suggesting that the ban would only be temporary and that it would only target some Muslims, but it is still an important element in his platform.

The exit polls conducted in New Hampshire and South Carolina asked respondents whether they supported or opposed Trump's proposed temporary ban. In New Hampshire, 65% of respondents supported the ban, while 38% opposed it. In South Carolina, the margin in favor of the proposal was larger. In both primaries, Trump captured approximately 40% of these voters'

Explaining Donald Trump's Political Ascendancy
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support.

During a debate in New Hampshire, the moderator asked the candidates whether they thought waterboarding was a form of torture and whether they would be willing to use this tactic against captured terrorists. Cruz explained that waterboarding was not a form of torture, he stated that it is instead a method of enhanced interrogation. Rubio, on the other hand, decided not to answer the question, criticizing the Obama administration's desire to close the controversial detention center in the US Naval Installation Guantanamo Bay. But, sensing an opportunity to make headlines and to reinforce his commitment to national security, Trump declared:

Well, I'll tell you what. In the Middle East, we have people chopping the heads off Christians, we have people chopping the heads off many other people. We have things that we have never seen before — as a group, we have never seen before, what's happening right now.

The medieval times — I mean, we studied medieval times — not since medieval times have people seen what's going on. I would bring back waterboarding and I'd bring back a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding.

While some Republican leaders rebuked Trump for his statement, his tough language resonated with New Hampshire's conservative electorate. The New Hampshire exit poll asked voters whether they were "worried about a terrorist attack in the U.S." and as table 8 indicates a majority of primary-goers believe that Trump is the best candidate to address the threat of terrorism.

Table 8. Worried about a terrorist attack in the U.S.?

Worried about a terrorist attack in the U.S.?	Trump	Kasich	Cruz	Rubio
Very Worried (58%)	40%	10%	14%	12%
Somewhat Worried (32%)	30%	23%	8%	9%
Not too worried (8%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Not at all worried (1%)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Do Trump's core supporters share his nativist sentiments? Although it is difficult to use the entrance/exit polls to answer this question, survey research suggests that many of his supporters actually do. After all, Trump led the "birther" movement, which questioned President Barack Obama's citizenship and the legitimacy of his presidency. He has recently employed this smear tactic to challenge Cruz's and Rubio's eligibility to run for the presidency. It is important to note that Cruz was born in Canada to an American mother. Most legal experts believe that he meets the U.S. Constitution's standard that presidential candidates need to be "natural-born" citizens. In contrast, Rubio was born in the United States. What to make of these attacks?

These slurs are coded messages, designed to challenge his opponents' "American-ness" and their adherence to American values. At a time when many Americans are concerned about the country's growing diversity and the perceived decline of white Americans' influence, Trump's smears are designed to stress he can protect America from foreign influences – be it Muslims entering the country, refugees fleeing conflicts around the world, or illegal immigrants who take jobs away from blue-collar workers and thwart these Americans' shot at the "American Dream".

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Since declaring his presidential ambitions, Trump has been steadily building a brand that emphasizes his strong leadership qualities. His strong nativist inclinations have resonated with many conservative voters, who fear that the homeland is under threat by domestic and foreign elements. Trump has been able to exploit these fears to advance his political ambitions and his success in the last three nomination contests seems to be fueled by voters who share his worldview.

Concluding Thoughts

Many Americans are surprised by Trump's political ascendancy. As this analysis shows, unlike his opponents, Trump has been able build a broad-based coalition of conservative voters who are largely angry at the *status quo* and anxious about the future. His core supporters believe that he is a strong and transformational figure that will "make America great again", which happens to be his campaign's slogan. Will he be the Republican presidential nominee? Could he win the presidency? It is too early to say, but it is clear that Trump's candidacy is not a joke but a development that will have a strong effect on American politics for years to come.

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