

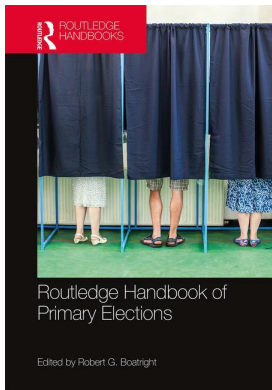
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THE FUZZY FRONTRUNNER

Donald Trump and the Role of Ideology in Presidential Nomination Politics

Dante J. Scala

Throughout the “exhibition season” of the 2016 Republican presidential nomination contest, pundits opined that Donald J. Trump’s lack of ideological consistency ultimately would doom his campaign, once the novelty of the mogul’s campaign dissipated. As with so many predictions regarding Trump, this was entirely mistaken. After losing the Iowa caucuses, Trump rebounded with wins in New Hampshire and South Carolina, and carried the great majority of primaries on his way to the nomination. Trump’s triumph raises an alarming number of questions about our understanding of the nomination process, including: Does ideology matter? Do primary and caucus participants have the interest and capability to use ideology as a means to choose a candidate from a crowded field?

To determine the importance of candidate ideology to Republican primary and caucus voters in 2016, I examine two sources of survey data. Using the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES),¹ I consider whether voters of different ideologies actually take differing positions on policy issues. In addition, I study whether primary and caucus participants were able to place Republican presidential candidates consistently on an ideological spectrum ranging from liberal and moderate to very conservative. Exit polls from various caucus and primary states allowed me to track whether voters of varying ideologies identified particular candidates as their ideological “champions” and attached their support accordingly. Finally, using CCES data, I consider the strength of voter ideology as a predictor of vote choice, as compared to a host of other factors, including socioeconomic status and partisanship.

All told, survey data undercut the notion that the 2016 Republican nomination contest signaled the end of ideology as a significant factor to primary and caucus participants. Ideological differences among candidates in a crowded field were not unintelligible to Republican voters – but they were, to borrow a term, somewhat “fuzzy” around the edges. One of Trump’s preternatural political gifts was his ability to present himself as appealing (or at least acceptable) to Republican voters of various ideological stripes. As a result, the mogul was able to win the lion’s share of support from an historically crucial bloc of Republican primary voters – self-described “somewhat conservatives” (Olsen and Scala 2016). Trump’s success among these mainstream conservatives was enhanced after several other center-right candidates were knocked out in the early rounds. In contrast, Trump’s chief competitors in the latter stages of the nomination contest, Texas Senator Ted Cruz and Ohio Governor John Kasich, staked out early claims to groups on the ideological extremes of the party. Then, to their dismay, they found themselves

marooned there, unable to build bridges to other factions of the party and form majority coalitions. Trump's triumph tells us that primary and caucus participants do not use ideology as a diamond-cutter, making fine distinctions between one candidate and another. But voters do use it as a rough-and-ready cue for making nomination decisions. As a result, ideological considerations once again were a key part of nomination dynamics.

The Fuzzy Frontrunner

As Trump was settling in as the GOP frontrunner in summer 2015, journalist and commentator Josh Barro contended that beneath the bombast, “a surprising fact emerges: Mr. Trump is a moderate Republican.” Barro noted that Trump had not taken a no-tax pledge; he was not unequivocally against a single-payer system for health care; his concept of tax reform resembled the stance of former Florida Governor Jeb Bush; he favored allowing abortions under certain circumstances; he advocated higher tariffs, not more free trade; and he supported the status quo on entitlements such as Social Security. Only on immigration did the mogul clearly adopt a very conservative position (Barro 2015).

A more systematic attempt to place Trump on the ideological spectrum concurred with Barro's conclusion. Crowdpac, which uses campaign finance data, voting records, and issue statements in order to score candidates, pegged Trump at 4.9 on a 10-point conservative scale. This score placed Trump left of center among the Republican candidates for the nomination. He was more conservative than New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, Ohio Governor John Kasich, and former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum, but to the left of Bush and Florida Senator Marco Rubio, and far left of Ben Carson, Texas Senator Ted Cruz and Kentucky Senator Rand Paul. Political scientist Seth Masket (2016) contended that Crowdpac's score was “plausible,” but “highly unreliable.” After all, Trump had no voting record to use as a basis for calculations. In addition, just weeks before Iowa and New Hampshire were to vote, Trump's campaign had issued very few specific public policy proposals, “with the exception of his ideologically extreme positions on immigration and refugees.” The candidate had an inventory of comments on various issues, but these also were problematic:

His past statements suggest he is supportive of current funding levels for Social Security and Medicare and supportive of same-sex marriage, and that his pro-choice positions have recently evolved to “pro-life with exceptions.” But he's been so vague on these issues – all he's really focused on is building a border wall and bombing ISIS – that it's difficult to know where he actually stands. *The Trump ideal point in the chart above should really look like a very diffuse probability cloud.*

Masket 2016, italics mine

In other words, intentionally or not (but certainly loudly), Trump was fuzzy. And as one of the first authoritative studies of the modern nomination process argued, fuzziness is potentially a high-reward strategy in a crowded nomination contest.

Going Fuzzy

Steven Brams, one of the first political scientists to study the modern nomination process, argued that primary and caucus participants seriously considered candidates' positions on public policy issues in making their voting decisions (1978). But he noted that candidates could pursue tactics that would enable them to appeal to voters of different ideological stripes simultaneously, and thus build coalitions of voters that spanned traditional dividing lines.

Brams began his analysis with the traditional assumptions of spatial theory. Candidates' positions on a given issue, as well as those of primary and caucus voters, can be placed on a continuum. Voters will look for a candidate whose position on important issues most closely matches their preferred position. Candidates respond to voters by adopting issue positions that are closest to most voters on the policy spectrum. Candidates may be forthright in their response, or they may choose to be "fuzzy" or ambiguous.

Both types of responses have risks and rewards. A candidate's clear and stark position statement will attract like-minded voters who praise him for his principles, but may repel others who find the candidate's position too distant from their own. Candidates might instead pursue a "fuzzy" strategy: by making ambiguous statements, their positions on issues may plausibly cover a range of possible ideologies and thus appeal to a wide spectrum of voters. Going "fuzzy" may backfire. A candidate might be branded as a flip-flopper. Or more subtly, voters might perceive a candidate's position to be further away from their own than the candidate intends. A candidate may be willing to take these risks, especially if he is a centrist attempting both to retain more moderate voters while reaching out to more ideological ones. This is a crucial task, given the sequential nature of the presidential nomination process, and the rapidly fluctuating political environment that candidates may face.

Candidates for the presidential nomination must accumulate delegates in a series of primaries and caucuses over a period of months. They win the prize not so much by gathering much-vaunted "momentum," as by avoiding attrition (Norrander 2006). In the early stages, for example, candidates must first contend with challengers who compete for votes from the same segment of the party electorate, whether it be moderates or religious conservatives (Brams 1978; for a case study of how primary voters made strategic choices in the 1988 primaries, see Cain et al. 1989).

This war of attrition was especially challenging in 2016, when seventeen Republicans vied for the nomination. Multicandidate primaries tend toward instability. When only two candidates contest a primary, both will seek the median position on issues in order to win a majority. When more than two candidates enter the fray, however, the median no longer is optimal. Rivals may win a plurality by lining up to the right or left of the center, leaving a centrist candidate with a relatively narrow base of voters. In a multicandidate primary, each candidate has to take into account the strategies of others: "Winning depends on the choices that all players make" (Brams 1978). The complexity of the task only intensifies if campaigns are fought over multiple issues of significance to voters (see Aldrich 1980 and Norrander 1986; for later work on spatial voting models in nomination contests, see Kenny and Lotfinia 2005).

Given the vulnerability of the center position in a multicandidate primary, centrist candidates would be wiser to line up to the right of center and forgo the moderate voter in the early rounds of the nomination process. A right-of-center candidate will be able to pick up more moderate voters in the latter stages, once other centrists drop out because they lack sufficient support. The survivors of the early rounds of a nomination contest will have more space on the ideological spectrum, and thus be in a position to start to build coalitions that cross ideological lines. Voters in later contests will have easier decisions to make with far fewer candidates, but they also may have to choose between "second-best" candidates after their most-preferred choice is eliminated.

Does Ideology Matter?

After Brams, other political scientists challenged the notion that most participants in the presidential nomination process are able to make meaningful ideological distinctions among

candidates from the same party, especially in a crowded field. Ordinary voters often appear ideologically inconsistent, if not altogether ignorant, compared to political activists who are capable of employing concepts such as “liberal” or “conservative” correctly in their internal belief structures, and externally in debates with others (Herrera 1992). In the twentieth century, activists led the conservative Right against pragmatic party members more interested in winning and retaining political office (Clarke et al. 1991; Costain 1980; also see McCann 1995). Although activists think more readily in ideological terms, they do not always place ideology first in their list of priorities when choosing a candidate. Delegates to the 1980 Republican convention tended to hold electability in higher importance than ideology, though many George H. W. Bush delegates remained loyal to their fellow moderates despite seeing Ronald Reagan as the candidate more likely to win the general election (Stone and Abramowitz 1983).

Compared to party activists, primary and caucus voters’ grasp of ideological concepts appears weak. A study of national survey data demonstrated that although Republican primary voters were more likely to use ideological terms in political discussions than their general-election counterparts, they were not more consistent in their beliefs. Nor did primary voters use ideological identification as a means to choose the candidate most suitable for them (Norrande 1989). Even the most politically engaged members of the general public offer ideological answers that are flawed, with “misunderstandings, top of the head responses, order effects, poor retention, and various satisficing strategies” (Jennings 1992). All told, primary voters’ ability to identify “the candidate who represents their own values and concerns” appears lacking (Lau 2013). Even setting aside these cognitive difficulties, voters simply might not be very concerned about a candidate’s ideology, compared to other factors in their decisions (Mayer 2008; Sides and Vavreck 2013).

Other scholars have affirmed the importance of ideology to primary and caucus voter decisions. Another study of the 1980 Republican primary, for example, found that when voters viewed Reagan as more conservative than his competitors, they were more likely to draw connections between their ideology and their vote choice (Wattier 1983). Ideology also might aid voters in drawing conclusions about candidates’ qualities (Kenney and Rice 1992). Ideology also might serve as a “short cut” for voters who do not know the specifics about where candidates stand on issues. Less knowledgeable voters might still be able to compare ideologies of candidates – moderates versus conservatives, for example – and choose one who seems to be the best match. Admittedly, voters can use ideological cues only if candidates are interested in drawing stark contrasts between themselves and their competitors. Voters’ ideology also may be quite malleable. They may view a candidate as ideologically compatible because they simply prefer that candidate. A popular candidate might persuade voters to adopt his ideology as their own (Downs 1957; Kenney 1993; Popkin 1994; Wattier 1983).

If primary and caucus voters cannot distinguish ideological differences, it may be that those contrasts are in fact too weak to discern. Interparty polarization has created intraparty “homogenization” within fields of presidential primary candidates, argues Paulson (2009). The 2008 Republican nominee, Arizona Senator John McCain, was often depicted as the alternative for moderate and liberal GOP primary voters, but he was in fact squarely in the conservative mainstream on many issues. His so-called “moderation” paled in comparison to that of Nelson Rockefeller a generation earlier, during an age in which there were clear differences between “Rockefeller Republicans” and Barry Goldwater conservatives. The major political parties – and their contenders for nominations – no longer possess the internal diversity that once prompted floor fights at national conventions.

Despite the increasing ideological homogeneity of their political parties, candidates for the nomination appear to make some campaign decisions for ideological reasons. For example,

conservative candidates in Republican primaries more aggressively attack moderate and liberal primary opponents with negative advertising than fellow conservatives (Ridout and Holland 2010; for contrasting conclusion, see Haynes and Rhine 1998). In addition, forecasting models indicate that more ideological candidates achieve greater vote shares over the course of the nomination season, even after taking into account factors such as pre-Iowa national polls and elite endorsements (Steger 2008).

The Four Faces of the Republican Party

A comprehensive examination of exit-poll data from 2000 to 2012 identified four factions in the Republican Party electorate, based on ideology and religious affiliation: liberals and moderates, somewhat conservative voters, very conservative evangelicals, and very conservative seculars (Olsen 2014; Olsen and Scala 2016).

In a conservative party, liberals and moderates retain influence in the Republican nomination electorate. Prior to 2016, their favored candidate won two of the last three nominations. These voters are distinctive for their ambivalence toward the GOP. Many prefer to identify themselves as independents rather than Republicans. They are more secular than other Republicans, and are more likely to be pro-choice on abortion. These voters tend to unite early in the nomination season. They championed McCain in 2000 and again in 2008, and backed Mitt Romney in 2012.

As Table 17.1 shows, the percentages of moderates participating in 2016 Republican primaries and caucuses ranged from 15 percent to 38 percent, according to exit polls taken in 26 states.² They were most prominent in the Northeast, including the first-in-the-nation primary state of New Hampshire. Their presence was least significant in the southern states, as well as the first-in-the-nation Iowa caucus and the Nevada caucus.

“Somewhat conservative” voters are the most numerous portion of the Republican nomination electorate, typically representing 35 to 40 percent.³ To become the nominee, a candidate must win their support. Prior to 2016, somewhat conservative voters backed Bob Dole in 1996, George W. Bush in 2000, McCain in 2008, and Romney in 2012. These voters’ preferences can be inferred from the characteristics of their favored candidates. They are conservative in both ideology and temperament, rejecting candidates who advocate for transformative change. They are neither populist nor libertarian.

They are perfectly satisfied to pay taxes for things they value and that seem to work for them, such as old age entitlements, decent public schools and universities, good roads, and public safety. They do, however, want to be “left alone” inasmuch as they do not think bureaucrats or other elites have their best interests at heart when they try to tax, regulate, or dominate them in the name of “public interest.”

Olsen and Scala 2016: 61

As in previous election cycles, somewhat conservative voters were a significant portion of every caucus and primary electorate, regardless of region. In almost every primary and caucus in 2016, somewhat conservative voters were a plurality, according to exit polls. (The only exceptions to this were in a few Deep South states, and the border state of Missouri.)

The “very conservative” faction of the Republican Party may be divided into two parts, evangelicals and seculars. Evangelical voters are most prominent in the southern and border states, where they may represent one of four primary and caucus-goers, if not more. They also have a very strong presence in caucus states, including Iowa, the first event on the nomination calendar.

Table 17.1 Ideological Composition of Republican Electorates, by State (Percentages)

State	Date	Region	Moderate or Liberal	Somewhat Conservative	Very Conservative
Iowa*	Feb. 1	Midwest	15	45	40
New Hampshire	Feb. 9	Northeast	29	45	26
South Carolina	Feb. 20	South	18	43	38
Nevada*	Feb. 23	West	16	45	40
Alabama	March 1	South	22	40	38
Arkansas	March 1	South	18	41	41
Georgia	March 1	South	21	42	38
Massachusetts	March 1	Northeast	38	44	18
Oklahoma	March 1	South	19	38	43
Tennessee	March 1	South	18	40	41
Texas	March 1	South	19	43	39
Vermont	March 1	Northeast	33	43	24
Virginia	March 1	South	28	40	32
Michigan	March 8	Midwest	25	47	28
Mississippi	March 8	South	16	37	47
Florida	March 15	South	30	39	31
Illinois	March 15	Midwest	28	46	26
Missouri	March 15	Midwest	21	39	40
North Carolina	March 15	South	19	42	37
Ohio	March 15	Midwest	28	42	31
Wisconsin	April 5	Midwest	27	43	31
New York	April 19	Northeast	29	47	24
Connecticut	April 26	Northeast	30	46	24
Maryland	April 26	South	25	47	28
Pennsylvania	April 26	Northeast	27	43	30
Indiana	May 3	Midwest	23	44	33

Source: Various exit polls

Note: * = Caucus.

These voters backed George W. Bush in 2000, Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee in 2008, and former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum in 2012. In 2016, two-thirds of very conservative participants in primaries and caucuses described themselves as “born again,” according to CCES data.

Very conservative seculars are prominent inside the Beltway where many national political and media elites reside, but nationwide only represent a small proportion of the Republican nomination electorate. In 2016, 23 percent of very conservative participants in the GOP nomination process said that religion was no more than “somewhat important,” if that. Not coincidentally, this bloc of voters typically settles for second-best choices for the nominee. None of their champions (Jack Kemp and Pete DuPont in 1988; Steve Forbes or Phil Gramm in 1996 and 2000; Fred Thompson or Mitt Romney in 2008; Herman Cain, Rick Perry, or Newt Gingrich in 2012) prospered in the later stages of the nomination process. Other factions tend to be repelled by these candidates, either because their economic policies are too radical, or because their interest in moral issues is too shallow. Altogether, voters who identified as “very conservative” typically made up one-third of Republican primary and caucus electorates, according to exit polls. Their numbers were smallest in the Northeast, and largest in the South. In both caucuses surveyed in Iowa and Nevada, very conservative voters were plentiful.

Voter Ideology and Issue Positions

One test of whether voter ideology matters, especially in party primaries and caucuses, is if it serves as a reliable predictor of a voter's positions on various issues. The CCES asked primary and caucus voters a variety of questions across various issue categories, including the use of military force, gun control, immigration, abortion, the environment, crime, gay marriage, and budget priorities.

Generally speaking, ideological groupings of voters took positions on issues that were consistent with their self-described position on the ideological continuum (Table 17.2). Liberal and moderate voters set themselves apart from more conservative voters most distinctively. They were more likely to be pro-choice on abortion; to be more lenient with illegal immigrants; to favor gun control and environmental regulation; to support the elimination of mandatory minimum sentencing for non-violent drug offenders; and to be more reluctant to employ U.S. military force except in cases of helping the United Nations uphold international law. Conservative voters occupied a middle ground in the Republican nomination electorate, though they tended to stand closer to very conservative

Table 17.2 Issue Positions of Republican Primary and Caucus Voters, by Ideology (Percentages)

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Liberals and moderates</i>	<i>Conservatives</i>	<i>Very conservative voters</i>
Abortion			
Pro-choice	54	26	12
Only abortion in case of rape, incest, health of woman at stake	50	66	54
Prohibit all abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy	69	85	86
Immigration			
Grant legal status to illegal immigrants	43	30	19
Identify and deport illegal immigrants	56	70	81
Gun control			
Background checks	87	78	67
Ban assault rifles	55	35	25
Environment			
Raise fuel efficiency	60	42	36
Require minimum amount of renewable fuels	53	31	22
Gay marriage			
Favor	63	31	12
Crime			
Increase police on the street	63	72	72
Eliminate mandatory minimums for non-violent drug offenses	63	49	41
Approve use of U.S. military force			
To help the U.N. uphold international law	43	29	22
To ensure the supply of oil	25	29	31
To destroy a terrorist camp	75	86	84
To intervene in case of genocide or civil war	38	39	40
To protect American allies	75	84	82

Source: Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

voters than liberal and moderate ones. The differences between conservative and very conservative voters were minimal on questions concerning crime prevention and the use of military force.

The Nomination Season Unfolds

The first events of the nomination season, the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary, demonstrated that Trump had established himself as an attractive candidate – not just to the working-class voters so often described as Trump’s base, but to the “somewhat conservative” voters at the very center of the GOP. These early events also hinted that his remaining competitors for the nomination were too weak or too factional to build the coalitions necessary to win a majority of convention delegates.

Texas Senator Ted Cruz, who assiduously courted Iowa’s evangelicals for months, was rewarded with a victory on caucus night. Cruz carried 34 percent of evangelicals (who comprised 64 percent of caucus-goers) and 44 percent of very conservative voters (40 percent of caucus-goers), according to exit polls. By winning Iowa, Cruz relegated his main competitors for the conservative evangelical vote – physician Ben Carson, former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, and former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum – to also-ran status. But among Iowa’s somewhat conservative voters, as Tables 17.3, 17.4 and 17.5 show, Cruz finished third, behind Florida Senator Marco Rubio and Donald Trump.

Table 17.3 Candidate Performance in Primaries and Caucuses, among Moderate Voters (Percentages)

State	Date	Trump	Kasich	Cruz	Rubio
Iowa*	2/1/2016	34	7	9	28
New Hampshire	2/9/2016	32	27	4	8
South Carolina	2/20/2016	34	21	7	23
Nevada*	2/23/2016	55	6	7	27
Alabama	3/1/2016	40	9	13	27
Arkansas	3/1/2016	36	11	16	29
Georgia	3/1/2016	44	11	9	30
Massachusetts	3/1/2016	48	29	3	15
Oklahoma	3/1/2016	35	11	17	30
Tennessee	3/1/2016	45	11	12	20
Texas	3/1/2016	34	9	26	24
Vermont	3/1/2016	34	40	5	15
Virginia	3/1/2016	23	20	7	40
Michigan	3/8/2016	37	36	12	8
Mississippi	3/8/2016	52	17	22	7
Florida	3/15/2016	42	13	12	25
Illinois	3/15/2016	41	32	15	10
Missouri	3/15/2016	43	21	23	9
North Carolina	3/15/2016	40	28	20	9
Ohio	3/15/2016	31	59	4	4
Wisconsin	4/5/2016	40	28	29	*
New York	4/19/2016	46	42	13	*
Connecticut	4/26/2016	46	48	4	*
Maryland	4/26/2016	50	35	10	*
Pennsylvania	4/26/2016	57	28	12	*
Indiana	5/3/2016	61	14	22	*

Source: Exit polls

Note: *Rubio dropped out of the nomination contest March 15. Cruz left the race May 3. Kasich withdrew May 4.

** = Caucus.

Table 17.4 Candidate Performance in Primaries and Caucuses, among Somewhat Conservative Voters

<i>State</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Trump</i>	<i>Kasich</i>	<i>Cruz</i>	<i>Rubio</i>
Iowa**	2/1/2016	24	2	19	29
New Hampshire	2/9/2016	38	14	9	11
South Carolina	2/20/2016	35	6	17	25
Nevada**	2/23/2016	50	4	16	26
Alabama	3/1/2016	46	5	17	20
Arkansas	3/1/2016	36	3	24	29
Georgia	3/1/2016	42	6	17	29
Massachusetts	3/1/2016	51	13	8	22
Oklahoma	3/1/2016	25	3	31	33
Tennessee	3/1/2016	43	6	16	26
Texas	3/1/2016	30	4	37	23
Vermont	3/1/2016	35	27	8	23
Virginia	3/1/2016	39	7	11	34
Michigan	3/8/2016	37	24	23	11
Mississippi	3/8/2016	53	10	27	7
Florida	3/15/2016	48	6	15	31
Illinois	3/15/2016	40	17	29	11
Missouri	3/15/2016	43	11	38	6
North Carolina	3/15/2016	46	12	32	8
Ohio	3/15/2016	38	48	10	2
Wisconsin	4/5/2016	36	15	47	*
New York	4/19/2016	67	23	10	*
Connecticut	4/26/2016	67	23	9	*
Maryland	4/26/2016	56	25	15	*
Pennsylvania	4/26/2016	62	21	15	*
Indiana	5/3/2016	55	8	34	*

Source: Exit polls

Note: *Rubio dropped out of the nomination contest March 15. Cruz left the race May 3. Kasich withdrew May 4.

** = Caucus.

Table 17.5 Candidate Performance in Primaries and Caucuses, among Very Conservative Voters
(Percentages)

<i>State</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Trump</i>	<i>Kasich</i>	<i>Cruz</i>	<i>Rubio</i>
Iowa**	2/1/2016	21	0	44	15
New Hampshire	2/9/2016	36	6	23	13
South Carolina	2/20/2016	29	3	35	19
Nevada**	2/23/2016	38	1	34	22
Alabama	3/1/2016	41	2	29	15
Arkansas	3/1/2016	26	1	43	20
Georgia	3/1/2016	35	3	37	17
Massachusetts	3/1/2016	47	4	26	16
Oklahoma	3/1/2016	29	1	43	19
Tennessee	3/1/2016	34	3	39	17
Texas	3/1/2016	23	3	57	11
Vermont	3/1/2016	27	22	19	21
Virginia	3/1/2016	36	3	31	23

Michigan	3/8/2016	35	14	38	11
Mississippi	3/8/2016	41	4	51	3
Florida	3/15/2016	48	2	26	23
Illinois	3/15/2016	36	9	49	5
Missouri	3/15/2016	36	3	55	4
North Carolina	3/15/2016	33	6	54	5
Ohio	3/15/2016	36	33	26	2
Wisconsin	4/5/2016	28	5	65	*
New York	4/19/2016	62	11	27	*
Connecticut	4/26/2016	55	15	28	*
Maryland	4/26/2016	54	11	34	*
Pennsylvania	4/26/2016	48	10	41	*
Indiana	5/3/2016	45	3	50	*

Source: Exit polls.

Note: *Rubio dropped out of the nomination contest March 15. Cruz left the race May 3. Kasich withdrew May 4.

** = Caucus.

Rubio’s third-place finish in Iowa, fueled by a late surge, appeared to be proof that he was finally making good on his much-vaunted potential as a national candidate. Part of that potential was the Florida senator’s supposed capability to reach out to various factions of the party and build a coalition. But in New Hampshire, it was Trump who proved to be the unifying candidate, cruising to a 20-point victory. (After a spurt of momentum post-Iowa, Rubio faded badly in the run-up to New Hampshire after a poor debate performance the weekend before the primary. He finished fifth.) Trump’s margin was even larger among the Granite State’s somewhat conservative voters. The mogul’s victory in the Granite State did not only bolster his campaign heading into South Carolina; it also effectively finished the campaigns of several potential center-right challengers for the “somewhat conservative” voter, such as former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, and businesswoman Carly Fiorina.

One center-right candidate that gained from New Hampshire was Ohio Governor John Kasich. His second-place finish, however modest (he only won 16 percent of the vote), was a positive surprise for a candidate who had struggled for months in the shadow of better-financed competitors. Kasich relied heavily on independents and moderate Republican voters in New Hampshire, much like former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman had in his 2012 presidential bid. Kasich also finished in second place among New Hampshire’s “somewhat conservatives,” though far behind Trump.

The next state on the calendar eleven days later, South Carolina, cemented the pattern for the remainder of the nomination season. Trump and Rubio demonstrated ability to reach across ideological lines and build coalitions, though Trump’s voter base typically dwarfed the Florida senator’s. Cruz and Kasich displayed support predominantly from one ideological faction, but were unable to cross ideological lines and appeal to other types of Republican voters.

Through the months of March, Trump won primaries in New England (Massachusetts and Vermont), the Midwest (Illinois, Michigan, and Missouri), and across the heartland of the party in the South (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia). Cruz carried primaries in his home state of Texas, as well as neighboring Oklahoma, as well as a few caucuses. Rubio failed to capitalize on an opportunity to defeat Trump in Virginia, then was trounced in his home state and left the race. Kasich did win his home state’s primary, but was unable to extend his success elsewhere.

Table 17.6 Candidate Performance by Voter Ideology (Percentages)

	<i>Liberals and moderates</i>	<i>Conservatives</i>	<i>Very conservative voters</i>
Kasich	19	8	3
Trump	49	53	44
Cruz	10	23	41
Rubio	10	10	5

Source: Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

In the late stages of the nomination season, Cruz made one successful stand in the Wisconsin primary, where he (not coincidentally) won a plurality of somewhat conservative voters. Trump then shrugged off this defeat, capturing the remainder of the primaries on the calendar.

Exit-poll data from various primaries and caucuses were confirmed by nationwide CCES data on respondents who reported participating in nomination events (Table 17.6). Of the four final survivors of the 2016 nomination contest, only Trump pulled roughly equally well from all ideological segments of the electorate, from liberals and moderates to very conservative voters. Rubio was the only one of Trump's top competitors able to put together a coalition of voters that achieved some degree of ideological balance, albeit a much smaller one than the eventual nominee's.

The last two competitors standing at the end of the nomination season, Cruz and Kasich, possessed voter bases that were factions, not coalitions. Cruz's performance among very conservative voters nearly matched Trump's, but fell off by nearly one-half among conservative voters – a group one might have expected to be ideal coalition partners for the Texas senator. Cruz repelled voters who were the farthest away ideologically from his position: fewer than one of ten self-described moderates and liberals supported him. Kasich's voter base was the mirror image of Cruz's support. His voters came predominantly from the moderate-liberal wing of the party. His support among the adjoining ideological bloc of conservative voters dropped steeply to less than 10 percent. His very conservative supporters were a minuscule group.

Trump's Ideological Rating

During the nomination campaign, commentators often took note of Trump's heterodox (if not outright contradictory) positions on numerous issues of importance to the Republican electorate. Based on the remarks of the commentariat, one might surmise that Republican voters would come to various and contradictory conclusions as to where Trump stood on the ideological spectrum. But this was not the case, according to CCES data.⁴ On the whole, Republican primary and caucus voters of various ideological stripes were quite consistent in their placement of Trump on an ideological spectrum.

Pluralities of each type of voter – self-identified liberals and moderates; conservatives; and very conservative voters – identified the eventual nominee as “somewhat conservative,” i.e. in the mainstream of the GOP electorate. Far fewer voters placed him on the extremes of the party, either as a liberal or as someone who was very conservative (Table 17.7).

Supporters of Trump's last two remaining opponents, Cruz and Kasich, differed significantly in their ideological composition. Cruz was most popular among very conservative voters, while Kasich attracted moderates. However, both Cruz adherents and Kasich supporters possessed a common assessment of Trump's ideology. Large numbers of both groups placed Trump on the left side of the ideological spectrum, rating him as either a liberal or a “middle of the road” politician.

Table 17.7 Trump’s Ideological Rating by Different Groups of Voters (Percentages)

<i>Trump’s rating</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Middle of the road</i>	<i>Somewhat conservative</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Very conservative</i>
All caucus and primary voters	12	22	30	21	8
Trump voters	6	20	31	29	10
Cruz voters	20	26	32	14	4
Kasich voters	13	23	23	14	9
Liberals and moderates	15	23	24	14	9
Conservatives	9	23	33	24	6
Very conservative voters	13	17	31	25	12

Source: Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

Cruz adherents, who most often identified themselves as very conservative or conservative, were the most likely to brand Trump as a liberal. Almost half of Cruz supporters did not consider Trump even to be “somewhat” conservative, instead placing him to the left of that category. Far fewer Cruz partisans were willing to place Trump on the right end of the ideological spectrum. Given Cruz’s efforts to depict himself as the one true conservative in the race, his supporters’ rating of Trump might be regarded as a manifestation of personal loyalty to the Texas senator. But Kasich voters, who often identified themselves as moderates, largely agreed with the assessment of Cruz supporters: they also were much more likely to identify Trump with the left wing of the Republican Party.

Trump voters themselves placed their favored candidate squarely in the ideological mainstream of their party, albeit right of center. More than half described him as either somewhat conservative or conservative. A significant minority pegged Trump as a “middle of the road” candidate, to the left of “somewhat conservative.” Few voters placed him on the extremes of the party, either on the far left or the far right.

Six out of every ten primary and caucus voters identified themselves as Republicans. These participants rated Trump in a fashion similar to how Trump voters themselves saw him – that is, as a candidate in the mainstream of their party. A plurality pegged him in the “somewhat conservative” category, and more than three-quarters placed him in the three middle categories, from “middle of the road” to “conservative.” Only one of five Republicans placed Trump on the extremes – about half of these described him as a liberal, the other half as very conservative.

Three of ten primary and caucus voters identified themselves as independent of party affiliation. These voters, who identified themselves more often as liberal or moderate than Republican voters, were also more likely to place Trump on the left side of the ideological spectrum. Only one in five independents described Trump as either conservative or very conservative.

Issue Positions of Trump, Cruz, and Kasich Voters

An examination of the issue positions of Trump, Cruz, and Kasich voters indicates that Trump voters often occupied an intermediate position on the spectrum (Table 17.8), between the more liberal supporters of the Ohio governor and the more conservative backers of the Texas senator. This was the case in both social issues (abortion and gay marriage) and government regulation (environmental policy and gun control). But on Trump’s hallmark issue, immigration, Trump

Table 17.8 Issue Positions of Republican Voters, by Candidate Choice (Percentages)

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Kasich</i>	<i>Trump</i>	<i>Cruz</i>
Abortion			
Pro-choice	43	36	16
Only abortion in case of rape, incest, health of woman at stake	50	63	61
Prohibit all abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy	71	79	88
Immigration			
Grant legal status to illegal immigrants	54	27	26
Identify and deport illegal immigrants	42	77	71
Gun control			
Background checks	91	80	69
Ban assault rifles	61	38	25
Environment			
Raise fuel efficiency	59	49	33
Require minimum amount of renewable fuels	54	37	22
Gay marriage			
Favor	61	36	23
Crime			
Increase police	57	75	67
Eliminate mandatory minimums for non-violent drug offenses	69	49	49
Race			
White people have advantages because of skin color	48	17	15
Racial problems are rare	25	38	45
Approve use of U.S. military force			
To help the U.N. uphold international law	50	31	23
To ensure the supply of oil	19	31	30
To destroy a terrorist camp	81	83	86
To intervene in case of genocide or civil war	46	37	38
To protect American allies	84	78	86

Source: Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

voters were as willing as Cruz supporters to deny illegal immigrants legal status, and more willing to deport them. Trump voters also were quite similar to Cruz backers on crime policy, and the use of military force. Finally, Trump and Cruz supporters held similar views on matters of race. They were similarly likely to assert that white people did not enjoy advantages over members of other races, and that racial problems were rare in America.

The Significance of Ideology

To determine whether voters' ideology remained a significant factor in determining their vote, even after controlling for a host of other variables, the author performed a logistic regression on the data from self-declared primary and caucus participants in the CCES (Table 17.9). The dependent variable was the respondent's vote choice. The following variables were included: gender; age (divided into four categories: 18–29-year-olds, 30–44, 45–60, and older than 60); level of education (specifically, whether the respondent possessed a college degree); marital status;

Table 17.9 Logistic Regression of Trump, Kasich, and Cruz Vote

	Trump	Kasich	Cruz
Age	0.17*** (7.02)	-0.06 (-1.35)	-0.08** (-2.88)
Female	-0.09* (-2.13)	0.17* (2.44)	-0.12* (-2.29)
College degree	-0.70*** (-15.65)	0.84*** (11.44)	0.29*** (5.42)
Married	-0.06 (-1.12)	-0.11 (-1.49)	0.15* (2.37)
Income \$100,000	-0.14* (-2.52)	0.30*** (3.66)	-0.09 (-1.41)
Evangelical	-0.23*** (-4.97)	-0.53*** (-6.84)	0.46*** (8.51)
Republican	0.44*** (9.03)	-0.16* (-2.13)	-0.26*** (-4.47)
Conservatism	-0.13*** (-4.15)	-0.60*** (-13.24)	0.84*** (21.06)
Constant	0.15 (1.06)	0.06 (0.32)	-4.48*** (-24.34)
N	16,311	16,311	16,311

Source: Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

Note: *t* statistics in parentheses; **p* < 0.05, ***p* < 0.01, ****p* < 0.001.

income (whether the respondent’s annual income was \$100,000 or greater); and whether a respondent identified as a “born again” Christian.

After controlling for all of these variables, a voter’s ideology remained a significant factor in determining vote choice. The more conservative the voter, the less likely that voter was to support Trump. In addition, males were more likely to vote for Trump than females. Older voters were more likely to support Trump than younger voters. Those with lower levels of socioeconomic status – i.e. those with lower incomes, or lacking a college degree – were more likely to vote for Trump. Born-again voters were less likely to do so. Finally, self-identified Republicans were more likely to support Trump than independents.

Cruz voters presented a far different profile. The more conservative the voter, the more likely that voter was to support Cruz. In addition, unlike Trump voters, those with a college degree were more likely to back the Texas senator. Self-identified born-again voters were more likely to be Cruz voters. Unlike Trump, a voter’s self-identification as a Republican was not a positive factor for Cruz, suggesting that ideology was a more powerful component than party identification.

Kasich voters also represented a distinctive niche in the Republican primary electorate. The less conservative the respondent, the more likely the respondent was to support the Ohio governor. Unlike Trump and Cruz, Kasich drew more support from women than from men. College-educated voters and those with higher incomes were more likely to support Kasich. Born-again voters were less willing to do so. Republicans also were less likely to back the Ohio governor, suggesting that independents were a source of strength for him.

Conclusions

As outlandish as a Trump nomination appeared when the mogul entered the fray in June 2015, his path to become the Republican standard bearer was a well-worn trail. Just like George W. Bush, John McCain and Mitt Romney, Donald Trump became the champion of “somewhat conservative” voters in the party’s mainstream. He did so in part by establishing his ideology in a “fuzzy” manner, not a purist one, with a mixture of moderate and conservative positions. Voters correctly pegged Trump as a center-right candidate overall, but some of his positions (particularly on crime and immigration) were appealing to the far right of the GOP.

One might explain Trump’s victory as a classic momentum play. The candidate won early contests in New Hampshire and South Carolina, gained even greater media attention, and won the support of voters in later contests who leaped onto the bandwagon. But this may give the oft-cited phenomenon of momentum too much credit for the outcome, and not enough to the power of attrition. As Norrander (2000, 2006) explains, the nomination contest is more a matter of remaining alive than gaining momentum, which often fades after a brief burst. Attrition, in contrast, has a long-term effect because the departure of candidates from a race is almost always permanent. Such was the case in 2016. After Iowa and New Hampshire, a slew of center-right competitors to Trump left the field. Marco Rubio stood as the only other candidate who had displayed potential to build coalitions across ideological lines. Once Rubio was gone, Trump had the center of the party to himself.

Ted Cruz was yet another candidate from the far-right wing of his party who found himself trapped on an ideological island in the presidential nomination process. During the early primaries and caucuses, the Texas senator was able to establish himself as the champion of very conservative voters, consolidating their support. In later contests, however, he proved unable (except in the Wisconsin primary) to build bridges to other factions of the Republican Party. Cruz was unable to forge coalitions despite the fact that his main opponent had shallow allegiances to the Republican Party and held heterodox positions on a number of issues supposedly important to Republican voters. In the midst of Cruz’s last-ditch effort to stop Trump, former Speaker of the House John Boehner – the prototypical mainstream, “somewhat conservative” leader (Olsen and Scala 2016) – described him as “Lucifer in the flesh,” and declared he would not vote for him against Hillary Clinton if he were the GOP nominee (Graham 2016).

John Kasich faced little of the enmity that Ted Cruz suffered from his fellow Republicans, yet he too found himself marooned after the first primaries and caucuses. Unlike Cruz, Kasich was no one’s idea of a radical Republican. In fact, a popular governor of a large swing state seemed a tailor-made candidate for GOP voters seeking a flight to safety from the volatile, unpredictable Trump. Although the Ohio governor’s upbeat, bipartisan message proved attractive to moderates, it repelled voters from other factions of the party just as readily as Cruz’s more abrasive personality and ideologically extreme positions. Just like Jon Huntsman four years earlier, Kasich’s outreach to moderates and independents paid modest dividends in the first-in-the-nation primary, but the road out of New Hampshire turned out to be a cul-de-sac. Kasich could not take advantage of his surprise finish in New Hampshire because, regardless of momentum, mainstream Republican voters did not find his candidacy attractive.

This survey of the 2016 Republican nomination process reminds us that for all the discussion of Trump’s disruptive populism, many conventional, mainstream Republicans found themselves comfortable with his candidacy – at least compared to the alternatives. Does this mean that ideology has lost meaning for current-day Republican voters? Foundational studies of the nomination process suggest a more subtle phenomenon in play. Primary and caucus voters do not possess an exact measure of a candidate’s ideology, but they are able to use ideology as a rough-and-ready cue in order to estimate a candidate’s position on a spectrum. Because voters are

only estimating, candidates can be intentionally “fuzzy,” blurring their ideological position in order to appeal to a wide variety of voters. Fuzzy candidates run the danger of being portrayed as wishy-washy. Trump’s bombastic, populist tone may have helped to prevent this depiction, as well as his harsh positions on crime, terrorism, and illegal immigration. And once Iowa and New Hampshire demolished most of his competition, Trump occupied the high ground in the center of the Republican nomination electorate – not a squishy moderate, not too conservative, but just conservative enough in the minds of mainstream Republican voters.

Notes

- 1 The Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) is a national stratified sample survey which asks a battery of questions about demographic characteristics and political attitudes (Ansolabehere and Schaffner, 2017). The survey sample contacted 16,695 voters who said they participated in the Republican nomination process. Measures of candidates’ performance in specific primaries and caucuses were gathered from exit-poll data available online, as well as an online election atlas (Leip n.d.).
- 2 CCES data from the 2016 survey confirm that the so-called conservative party still contains a significant percentage of moderates, and even a small percentage of liberals. Approximately three out of ten Republican primary and caucus voters identified themselves as either liberal (3 percent) or moderate (26 percent). The percentage of moderates and liberals was almost double the portion of self-described “very conservative” voters in the Republican nomination electorate. Self-described independent voters – 30 percent of this electorate – were far more likely to describe their ideology as moderate or liberal than self-described Republicans.
- 3 The CCES did not offer “somewhat conservative” as an option to respondents in identifying their ideology. Instead, CCES offered the options of “conservative,” as opposed to “liberal,” “moderate,” or “very conservative.” Slightly more than half described themselves as conservative.
- 4 The CCES asked voters to place candidates along an ideological spectrum by classifying them in one of the following categories: “liberal,” “middle of the road,” “somewhat conservative,” “conservative” and “very conservative.” They also were asked to rate themselves ideologically, albeit with slightly different categories (“liberal,” “moderate,” “conservative,” and “very conservative”).

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