

Opinion | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

# The Party of Lincoln Is Now the Party of Trump

Thomas B. Edsall    OCT. 26, 2017

Last year, as it became clear that Donald Trump would win the Republican nomination, analysts on both the right and the left speculated that millions of regular Republicans would be repulsed by his ethnonationalism and misogyny.

Writing in the *Washington Post* in August of 2016, Whit Ayres, a Republican pollster, warned:

Republicans running for election this year have watched the wheels coming off the Trump Train with increasing alarm. How can Republican candidates in down-ballot races survive such a calamitous nominee at the top of their ticket?

Come Election Day, however, Republican voters did not abandon their party. The Republican share of the electorate grew slightly, from 32 percent in 2008 and 2012 to 33 percent in 2016, and Trump carried these voters 11 to 1.

This pattern has continued into the present and shows no signs of letting up. In

party and the country in a very dangerous direction. For the moment, however, it is the president's critics who are butting their heads against a brick wall. The reality is that neither Flake nor Corker is seeking re-election, and both would have struggled to win renomination if they presented themselves as adversaries of President Trump.

In short, the Trump-Steve Bannon-Laura Ingraham wing of the Republican party is ascendant. As Mike Allen headlined his post on *Axios* Wednesday: "Virtually every Republican now a Trump Republican." Allen went on:

Trump enjoys public support (despite private gripes) from most of the 49 other Senate Republicans and 239 House Republicans, including every person in elected leadership.

Why is this still true, despite their "private gripes"? Because of the "strong, sustained support of G.O.P. voters" that the president enjoys.

In an email, Alex Theodoridis, a political scientist at the University of California-Merced, put the state of play in a larger perspective: "The real story of Election 2016 is that the vast majority of Republicans voted for Trump" despite the fact that he was an outlier candidate who "lacked the normal credentials in terms of experience, ideology and character."

The nomination of an untraditional candidate from outside the party's mainstream turned the 2016 election into "a stress test for Republican partisanship, and it passed with flying colors," Theodoridis wrote.

"Republicans identify, at a deep psychological level, more strongly with their party than do Democrats," according to Theodoridis:

The evidence is rather clear that the modern hyper-polarization is far more characterized by tribal division than by ideological distance. The real story seems to be the growing us-versus-them, in-group/out-group dynamic. If you look at what we call thermometer scores, which have respondents rate their feelings about groups from cold to warm, zero degrees to 100 degrees, the average rating of the other party has dropped from nearly 50 degrees in the early 1980s to temperatures in the 30s today.

Theodoridis summed up the conclusions he and his colleagues reached in a blog post in *Scientific American* in November 2016:

Partisanship for many Americans today takes the form of a visceral, even subconscious, attachment to a party group. Our party becomes a part of our self-concept in deep and meaningful ways.

In other words, the assumption that many Republican voters would be repelled by Donald Trump turned out to be wrong; instead party loyalty — “a visceral, even subconscious, attachment” — takes precedence.

In fact, as the political scientists Leonie Huddy, Lilliana Mason and Lene Aarøe argue in an article in *American Political Science Review*, the most powerful form of partisanship is not principled, ideological commitment to conservative or liberal policies, but “expressive partisanship,” which is more of a gut commitment:

A subjective sense of belonging to a group that is internalized to varying degrees, resulting in individual differences in identity strength, a desire to positively distinguish the group from others, and the development of ingroup bias. Moreover, once identified with a group or, in this instance, a political party, members are motivated to protect and advance the party’s status and electoral dominance as a way to maintain their party’s positive distinctiveness.

Traditionally, political scientists have measured partisanship by asking voters the following questions: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?” Those who say Republican or Democrat are then asked “Would you call yourself a strong Republican/Democrat or a not very strong Republican/Democrat?” Independents are asked “Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?” Respondents are then ranked on a seven point scale from strong Democrat to strong Republican.

Political scientists measure expressive partisanship by looking at responses to more subjective questions, including “How important is being a Democrat or Republican to you?”, “How well does the term Democrat or Republican describe

you?” and “When talking about Democrats or Republicans, how often do you use ‘we’ instead of ‘they’?”

It turns out, according to Huddy, Mason and Aarøe, that those who are strong partisans on the basis of emotional and expressive links to their parties feel angrier

when threatened with electoral loss and more positive when reassured of victory. In contrast, those who hold a strong and ideologically consistent position on issues are no more aroused emotionally than others by party threats or reassurances.

These expressive partisans also

feel increased *schadenfreude*, a complex positive emotion, when they read about bad things happening to or reflecting poorly on a political candidate of the other party. They even feel this positive emotion in reaction to events that are clearly negative.

Three other political scientists — Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood and Yphtach Lelkes — reached a similar conclusion in a 2012 paper, “Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization.”

They argue that instead of treating polarization in the general electorate as a conflict over competing policies, the better measure is “affective polarization,” which is their term for the way voters “not only increasingly dislike the opposing party,” but are also willing to “impute negative traits to the rank-and-file of the out-party.”

Iyengar and his co-authors contend that

affective polarization has permeated judgments about interpersonal relations, exceeds polarization based on other prominent social cleavages, and that levels of partisan affect are significantly higher in America.

In a 2017 paper, “All in the Eye of the Beholder: Asymmetry in Ideological Accountability,” Iyengar and Sood provide further insight into how so many

Republicans found their way to voting for Trump.

They demonstrate that partisan voters' approval of their party's leaders "bears little relationship with their ideological extremity." Because of this, candidates like Trump "enjoy considerable leeway to stake out positions at odds with the preferences of their supporters."

Iyengar and Sood buttress their analysis by pointing out that from December 2008 to August 2010, "Sarah Palin's support never once slipped below 69% among Republicans," even though her positions were well to the right of the average Republican voter and she was subjected to brutal ridicule in the liberal media.

The growing strength of the kind of partisanship that is widespread today — whether you call it visceral, expressive, affective or tribal — undermines the workings of democratic governance. Not only are Republicans willing to support Trump, but both Democrats and Republicans are inclined to demonize the leadership of the opposing party.

Iyengar and Sood describe this as the "boomerang effect":

The position attributed to a disliked party perceived as ideologically distant is pushed even further away from the receiver's position. For instance, a Democrat who encounters a Republican campaign ad on government spending enlarges the discrepancy between herself and the Republican on the issue.

While attention has focused on Trump and the Republican Party (since both are in power), Democrats are hardly exempt from tribalism.

After Flake denounced Trump on the Senate floor on Tuesday, Tom Perez, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, issued a statement making the point that Flake, like Corker, had waited until he was no longer seeking office to break Republican ranks:

Senator Flake voted with Donald Trump 91% of the time. His retirement is a symbol of a Republican Party whose leaders allow Donald Trump's divisive

politics to flourish as long as it serves their political interests, and who fail to criticize this dangerous president until it's too late.

Nolan McCarty, a political scientist at Princeton, tweeted: “When Dems attack those GOP pols who stand up to Trump, perhaps they are the ones putting party before country,” a comment picked up by Ryan Enos, a political scientist at Harvard, who added, “Yes, this seems to be a case of tribal loyalties coming out at the worst possible time.”

Along similar lines, Theodoridis and Stephen Goggin, a political scientist at San Diego State, asked 1609 voters whether two unnamed senators were Democrats or Republicans. One of the two was described as the subject of a story headlined “Senator Wins Anti-Corruption Award,” the other as the subject of a story headlined “Senator Admits to Lying.” Democrats consistently labeled the anti-corruption senator a Democrat and the liar a Republican, while Republicans took the opposite view.

Perhaps most importantly, hyperpolarization is a powerful disincentive to compromise. How can you make concessions to your mortal enemies? To even start negotiations can be viewed, in this context, as surrender.

Trump’s grip on his party remains firm. A recent Wall Street Journal/NBC poll asked Republican voters: “Do you consider yourself to be more of a supporter of Donald Trump or more of a supporter of the Republican Party?” The answer: Trump 58, the Republican Party 38.

Trump’s overall favorability ratings may be terrible (39 percent positive to 56 negative), according to a RealClearPolitics average of the eight most recent surveys, but the generic Democratic advantage is a relatively modest 9.2 percentage points. In an October 15-16 Economist/YouGov survey, Democratic voters said they planned to vote for Democratic House candidates 88-3 and Republicans said they would vote for Republican House candidates 86-3. Independents favored Republican candidates 27-22. These are not the kind of numbers Democrats need to win control of the House or Senate.

A number of questions present themselves to us as a nation, most notably: Where are we going? Off a cliff appears to be the answer for now, but who is going to help us climb back up? What can mitigate these developments except disaster? Over time, will we just swing back and forth between parties with no bipartisan achievements at all? What phoenix will rise from the ashes of our tribal partisanship?

Of course, this phenomenon is not limited to the United States. It is a worldwide problem, which is another way of extending the question. Germany, France and the Netherlands have one answer, still refusing to yield government control to right-wing populists despite the success of ethonationalist insurgencies in all three countries; Austria, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary have another answer — they are all currently swerving to the far right. Which path will we take?

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