

Can This Really Be Donald Trump's Republican Party?

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John Feehery, a prominent Republican lobbyist with roots on the South Side of Chicago, understands that he embodies the Republican predicament.

He warns that while the party's establishment used to be able to call the shots when it came to the selection of presidential nominees,

We are now living in a [post-recession world](#) where fundamental assumptions have changed. In this new reality, Republicans can't just do the bidding of big donors. Our guys are too in tune with donors and not with the concerns of regular voters. Donald Trump has tapped into a new reality.

Raised in a middle-class Irish-Catholic family, Feehery graduated from Marquette in 1986 and rose quickly in the ranks of the party. His most prominent jobs were as communications director for the former House majority leader Tom DeLay and later for House Speaker Dennis Hastert.

Since giving up work as a staffer in 2005, Feehery, 52, has done well. He is president of the public relations arm of [QGA Public Affairs](#), a major Washington lobbying firm. [QGA's clients](#) include AT&T, United States Steel, State Farm and Zurich Financial Services.

Feehery believes that as Democrats have made gains among well-educated and relatively affluent whites, Republicans "have to rely much more on the white working class than on white upper middle-class voters."

When I asked Feehery what the party needed to do to get back on track, he paused and said, "I'm not sure it's fixable."

Despite what liberals might think, Trump's success in capitalizing on voter animosity to immigration and to political correctness has shocked many conservative Republicans.

Matthew Continetti, the editor in chief of the Washington Free Beacon, warned in a column on Dec. 11, "[The Party Divides: A Trump nomination would be the end of the GOP](#)":

Homegrown terrorism, demographic panic, racial tension, income stagnation, and Trump's persona may catalyze a political realignment along the lines we have seen before in our politics and see currently in Europe's.

Continetti goes on to ask:

Have conservatives and Republicans thought through what would happen next? What choices we might have to make? Or are we too afraid to acknowledge the possibility that the movement and party to which we belong is no longer our own?

Reihan Salam, executive editor of National Review, [told The New Yorker](#):

Trump is not someone I consider an ideal candidate — he does not represent my line of thinking. But he is proving that certain beliefs the professional political class had about who Republican primary voters are — what they respond to, what they care about — were just incorrect.

For those on the traditional right, one of the most infuriating aspects of Trump's ascendance is the sense that a man [described by Jeb Bush](#), according to Politico, as "a buffoon" and a "clown," has wrested control of their party, an institution they have spent five decades turning into the home of principled ideologues.

Rich Lowry, the editor of National Review, looks at Donald Trump and does not see a conservative. Together with Ramesh Ponnuru, a senior editor, Lowry wrote in the October 19 essay "[Trump Wrongs the Right](#)" that Trump:

basically never says "freedom" or "liberty." He gives no indication of caring about the Constitution. He talks only sparingly about the federal debt. He has, in short, ignored central and longstanding conservative tenets that seemed to have become only more important in the tea-party era — and he has not only gotten away with it, but thrived.

Although "Trump is not a conservative and does not deserve conservatives' support, Republicans can nonetheless learn from him," Lowry and Ponnuru write. He

has exposed and widened the fissures on the American right. If conservatives are to thrive, they must figure out how to respond creatively, sensibly, and honorably to the public impulses he has so carelessly exploited.

Lowry and Ponnuru make a point similar to Feehery's:

The fact that Trump's polling did not suffer even a modest drop after his soak-the-rich comments should tell other Republicans that the priorities of the donors they meet at fundraisers are not the same as those of the voters whose support they need.

Trump, the survivor of many financial ups and downs — including [four Chapter 11 corporate bankruptcies](#) — has emerged as uniquely positioned to capitalize on the thwarted aspirations and economic vulnerability of much of the electorate.

The extended aftermath of the financial collapse of 2008 has given Trump the opportunity to exploit a political opening: the shift to the right that predictably follows such crises. A recent research paper, "[Going to Extremes: Politics After Financial Crises, 1870-2014](#)," argues that financial crises like the

Great Depression of the 1930s and the recent prolonged recession push voters in a conservative direction and allow right-wing parties in Europe to flourish.

The authors, Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick and Christoph Trebesch, all European economists, report that under such circumstances,

Votes for far-right parties increase strongly, government majorities shrink, the fractionalization of parliaments rises and the overall number of parties represented in parliament jumps.

The United States' two-party system effectively precludes the emergence of right- (or left-) wing third parties, but in some other respects, the post-2008-2009 period here parallels that of European democracies.

These parallels include the sharp rightward movement in the elections of 2010 and 2014, sustained Republican control of the House since 2010, and the 2014 Republican takeover of the Senate.

Rather than a European right-wing party, the current contest for the Republican nomination has produced a unique American phenomenon: Donald J. Trump. Despite near universal opposition from the party establishment, Trump has [led the pack every day since July 20](#), except for three days in early November when Ben Carson briefly tied him in the polls.

If Trump were to falter, many [political analysts foresee](#) Ted Cruz, a candidate with views similar to Trump's who also enjoys the animosity of party elders, [filling](#) the vacuum. Trump and Cruz are, in effect, the rebellious American counterparts to the [UK Independence Party](#) in England; the [National Front](#) in France; and the [People's Party](#) in Denmark.

The dynamic interaction of three current trends — voter [anger over immigration](#), over [offshoring and robotization](#), and over damage wrought by the [economic meltdown of 2008](#) — has been crucial to Trump's success. Together, these developments have blown a hole in American politics. Trump, wielding ferocious rhetoric, has plowed through.

Take immigration: For many voters, the discomfiting point made 12 years ago [in the Texas Observer](#) by [Michael Lind](#), policy director of the economic growth program at the New America foundation, remains true today. The left, Lind said,

cannot cope with reality of how low-wage unskilled immigration has been driving down wages at the bottom of the labor market since the 1960s. Whenever multiculturalism collides with the interests of labor, multiculturalism wins.

Though his findings are contested by other economists, George J. Borjas, a professor of economics at Harvard, [argues](#) that

illegal immigration reduces the wage of native workers by an estimated \$99 to \$118 billion a year, and generates a gain for businesses and other users of immigrants of \$107

billion to \$128 billion.

Or take the hollowing out: “In 1979, the four middle-skill occupations (sales; office and administrative workers; production workers; and operatives) accounted for 60 percent of employment,” [according to David Autor, an economist at M.I.T.](#) By 2012, “it was 46 percent.”

Or take the aftereffects of the financial collapse: “The cost of the crisis, assuming output eventually returns to its precrisis trend path, is an output loss of \$6 trillion to \$14 trillion. This amounts to \$50,000 to \$120,000 for every U.S. household,” analysts at the [Dallas Federal Reserve](#) calculated:

While the recession was an economic phenomenon, its impact went beyond a sizable drop in output or consumption. The adverse psychological consequences are enormous, even if they are not easily quantifiable.

The “[stark legacy of the recession and the lackluster labor market](#)” are apparent in “[reduced opportunity and deterioration](#),” according to the Dallas Federal Reserve. The number of men and women “[not in the labor force](#)” continues to grow, from 92.5 million in November 2014 to 94.4 million last month.

In other words, the stage has been set for Trump.

If, as Feehery argues, the central vulnerability of the Republican establishment and its congressional wing is excessive deference to donors and party elites, it is conceivable that Trump’s bid will force less obeisance to this stratum.

Given the intensity of this intraparty conflict, leaders of the Republican establishment are wise to have begun their [contingency planning](#) for a deadlocked convention in Cleveland in July – or, for that matter, for [a Trump third-party bid](#).