Pitchforks and Torches

Abstract Bitecofer sets the context of the 2016 presidential election. Rather than a singular event, the 2016 presidential election is best understood as the most recent chapter of a story that began decades ago. Over the past 50 years, America has undergone dramatic cultural, political, demographic, and technological transformations leading to an era of polarized politics. With one party immersed in a Civil War and the other facing an emerging revolution, the stage was set for the unlikely candidacies of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders.

The 2016 presidential primaries and general election didn't occur in a vacuum. In order to understand these unprecedented elections, it is necessary to examine the context in which they occurred. Rather than a singular event, the 2016 presidential election cycle is best understood as the most recent chapter of a story that began decades ago. Over the past fifty years, America has undergone dramatic cultural, political, demographic, and technological transformations leading to an era of polarized politics. Starting in the 1960s, a series of landmark pieces of legislation and judicial rulings in the federal courts began to fundamentally alter the country's political and cultural landscape. *Brown v. Board of Education*, the *Civil Right Acts of 1964*, and the *Voting Rights Act of 1965* all used

the power of the federal government to force an end to the Southern Jim Crow system of segregation and finally enfranchised southern blacks, who registered to vote en masse starting in the 1968 presidential election. Delivered by an alliance of northern liberal Democrats and liberal Republicans in Congress, and signed into law by a former Texas senator Democratic President Johnson, the *Civil Rights Act* and the *Voting Rights Act* tore apart the Democratic Party's New Deal Coalition; the longstanding alliance of liberal and conservative Democrats that had dominated Congress since the Great Depression. Over the course of the next few decades, southern Democrats began to disappear as ideological conservatives either party switched into the Republican Party or were replaced by Republicans challengers. The South enjoyed a brief period of party competition before moving back to one-party dominance; this time by an ideologically conservative Republican Party.

At the same time, other major cultural and political shifts were occurring. The women's liberation movement began to dramatically alter the role of women at home and at work. Women used the federal courts to challenge state-level obstacles to reproductive freedom such as access to birth control and later, abortion via the famous *Roe v. Wade* decision. The Vietnam War and then the Watergate scandal eroded the public's trust in government, redefined the ability of the press to access and publish classified information, and turned an entire generation into a counterculture movement. Over the same time period, America's public sphere underwent a transition to secularization. In the Supreme Court, a series of decisions under Chief Justice Warren presiding over the Court's last liberal majority ushered in a wall of separation between church and state from cases such *Engel v. Vitale 1962* where the Supreme Court ruled that recitation of prayer in public schools was unconstitutional and the *Abington School District v. Schempp 1963* decision where the Court ruled that the use of the Bible in public school classrooms presented unconstitutional violations of the First Amendment's *Establishment Clause*. More recently, the landmark Supreme Court decision *Obergefell v. Hodges 2015* struck down as unconstitutional state bans on same-sex marriage, legalizing same-sex marriage in all fifty states. The *Obergefell* decision was celebrated by civil rights activists and liberals but maligned by religious conservatives. Finally, the liberalization of America's immigration laws allowed for an influx of non-European immigrants and the emergence of multiculturalism, which challeges the notion of one dominant American identity. All of these changes occurred by federal intervention via judicial fiat, legislative fiat, or both.

These changes occurred over the same time period in which the country was in the midst of a technological revolution. Cable television, initially used to connect rural Americans to network television, was deregulated leading to pronounced growth. With growth came innovations such as premium networks like *Home Box Office* (HBO), *Music television* (MTV), and later, pay-per-view stations including stations showing pornography. Cable news channels were launched as well as conservative radio programs. American civic discourse began to change. Of course, cable television wasn't the only major innovation affecting civic life; as computer technology improved the internet began to emerge as the new center of the political universe; first with partisan blogs and later via social media sites.

The America that entered the twenty-first century was dramatically different. Children born after the 1970s knew only an egalitarian society in which sexism and racism were no longer openly tolerated and the role of religion in the public sphere had been dramatically reduced. These changes led to the so-called culture war in which the Republican and Democratic parties came to symbolize opposing factions. The Republican Party's center of power had once been concentrated in the North East but was now concentrated in the South and the Mountain West. The Democratic Party's power had been centered in the South, but the Democratic Party of the new millennium was concentrated in the North East and the West Coast. Once ideologically diverse, the parties had sorted into ideologically homogenous camps: Liberals into the Democratic Party and conservatives into the Republican Party in a phenomenon known as party sorting (Levendusky 2010; Abramowitz 2013). The modern Republican Party became a demographically homogenous ideological movement guided by a few key principles; small government, free market economics, and cultural conservatism. The Democratic Party's coalition became racially and ethnically diverse; representing a coalition of interest groups operating under the umbrella of the Democratic Party (Grossman and Hopkins 2016).

Ideological homogeneity allowed the parties to polarize politically. Moderates were purged via party primaries, especially within the Republican Party. Congress became ideologically polarized and fell into gridlock (McCarty et al. 2016). Figs. 2.1 and 2.2 show the massive ideological change that has occurred in Congress since the 1960s. In the 88th Congress, which began in 1963 and ended in 1965, Congress had many ideologically conservative Democrats and ideologically liberal
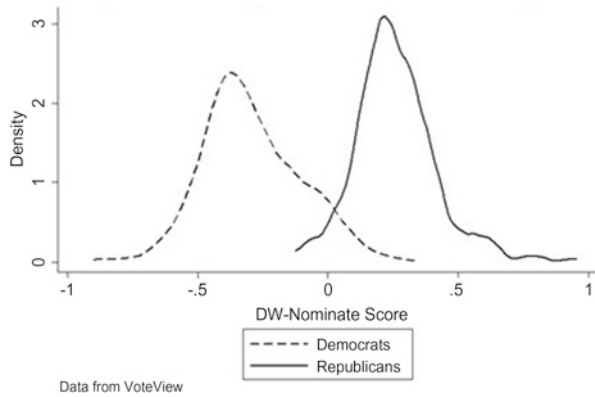
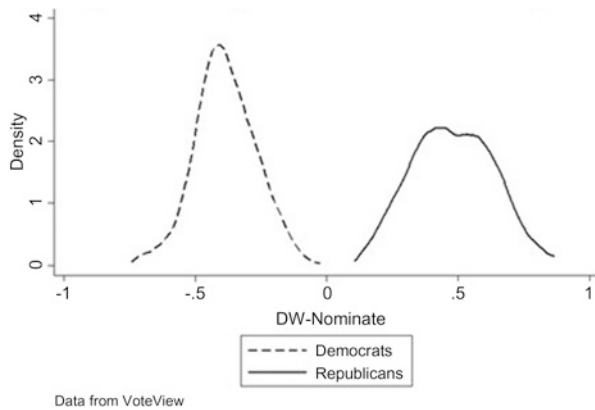**Fig. 2.1**   Ideological distribution of the 88th Congress

Fig. 2.2   Ideological distribution of the 114th Congress

Republicans who were able to form bipartisan coalitions to pass controversial legislation. By the 114th Congress, there were few liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats left; the last of the so-called Blue Dog, Democrats were wiped out in the 2014 congressional midterms. The number of ideologically moderate members in both parties decreased dramatically.
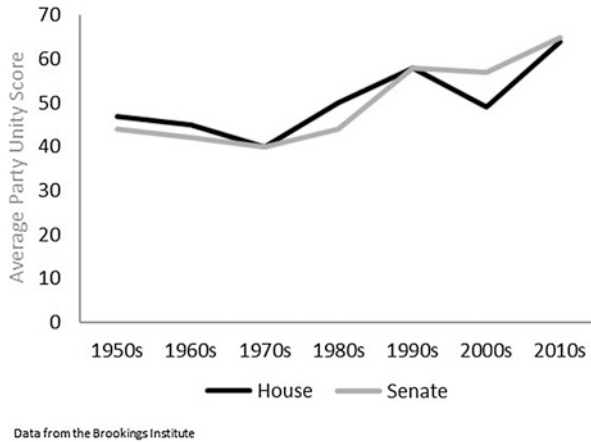
Fig. 2.3   Party unity in Congress 1950–2013

In today's Senate, the most conservative Democrat (Joe Manchin of West Virginia) is still more liberal than the most liberal Republican (Susan Collins of Maine). Party unity voting has also increased dramatically. Fig. 2.3 shows party unity scores from the 1950s until 2013 compiled by the *Brookings Institute for their Vital Statistics on Congress* report. Party unity scores consider how often a member is voting with their own party on partisan votes. Since the 1950s, scores have been increasing, especially in the Senate. Averaging party unity scores for each chamber for each decade reveals a sharp increase in party unity voting since the 1950s.[1]

Like their elite counterparts, American voters have become less moderate, more ideological, and more allegiant to their preferred political party. As Fig. 2.4 shows the ideological composition of the electorate has changed significantly since the 1980s. Although liberals always identified with the Democratic Party at high rates, conservatives were more nuanced. Between 1980 and 2016, the percent of conservatives identifying themselves as Republicans has increased significantly, rising from 59% in 1980 to 83% in 2016. Party sorting has caused the Republican and Democratic parties to adopt increasingly divergent party platforms, much of which is composed of culture war issues such as abortion, gay rights, and gun control.
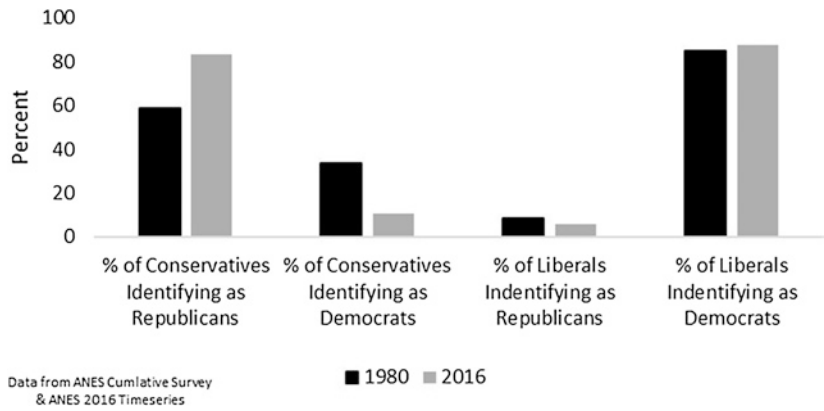
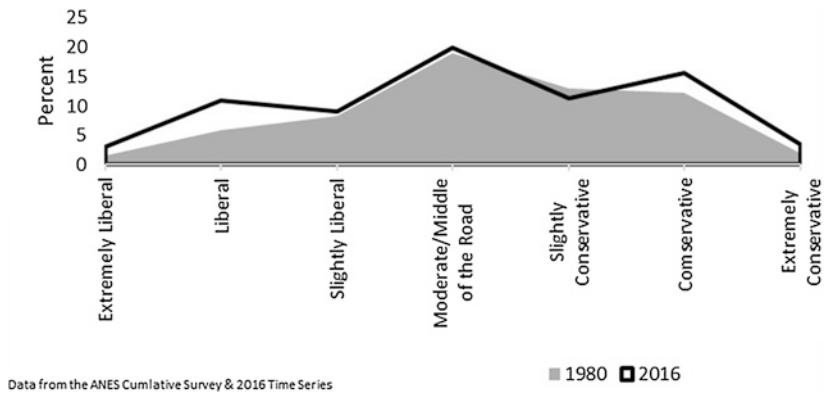**Fig. 2.4**   Party sorting in the electorate: 1980 vs. 2016

Fig. 2.5   Change in self-identified ideology: 1980 vs. 2016

Party sorting has led to increasing ideological extremism in the electorate. As conservatives and liberals sorted into their respective parties, their members became more ideologically homogenous. Ideological homogeneity allows the outer bounds of the ideological spectrum to stretch. Figure 2.5 shows the ideological distribution of Republicans and Democrats in both 1980 and in 2016. Respondents were asked to identify their ideology on a seven-point scale. Comparing the distributions

reveals a very little change in the number of people who identify as moderates over the thirty-five year period. However, the number of respondents who identify as either liberal or conservative has increased significantly; as has the number of people who identify themselves as extremely conservative and extremely liberal.

The change in the ideological distribution of the electorate is even more profound when policy preferences are used as a proxy to measure ideology. While useful, self-identified ideology can be vulnerable to estimation bias because of the negative connotations that "liberal" and "conservative" have. People over report moderation in the same way that people over report being an Independent until they are pushed as to whether they lean toward one party or the other. Once so-called leaners are removed the "true" Independent rate is often cut in half. Another method of estimating ideology is to use voters' policy preferences as a proxy for self-identified ideology. As survey respondents express preferences along policy dimensions, they are telling us something about their ideological dispositions. Using longitudinal data from the *Pew Research Center* called the *American Values Survey,* I am able to recover policy preferences of American voters over three decades to examine if there is observable differences in policy preferences over time. The Pew data contain eight policy questions that have been asked consistently since 1987. Each respondent's responses on the eight policy questions are recoded into a numeric value ranging from 1 (the most conservative response) to $= 1$ (the most liberal response). Doing so allows their responses to be combined into one variable that provides an ideology score for each respondent. The ideology scores can be used to look for changes in the distribution of the electorate over time. Figs. 2.6 and 2.7 show changes in the ideological distribution of Republican and Democratic voters in 1987 and in 2012. The distribution of the electorate has changed significantly over the past few decades. The mean Democrat and the mean Republican have moved further apart, and there are less voters holding policy preferences that represent some conservative and some liberal preferences.

Combining all voters into one distribution for each year reveals a sharp decline in the number of moderates between 1987 and 2012, something that is not found in self-reported ideology (see Fig. 2.8). The difference suggests that there is more polarization in the electorate than previously thought when an indirect measurement is used. Also of note is the increase in the size and length of the tails of
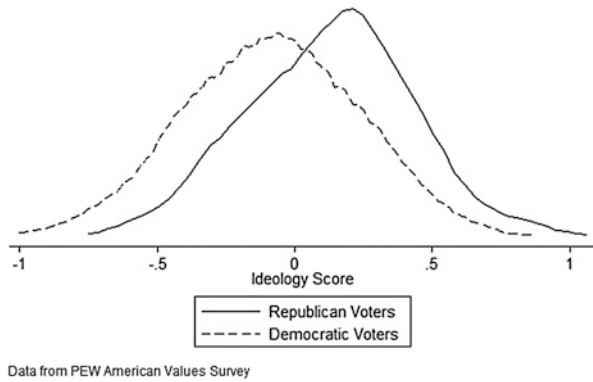
Data from PEW American Values Survey

Fig. 2.6   Ideological distribution of the American electorate, by party: 1987
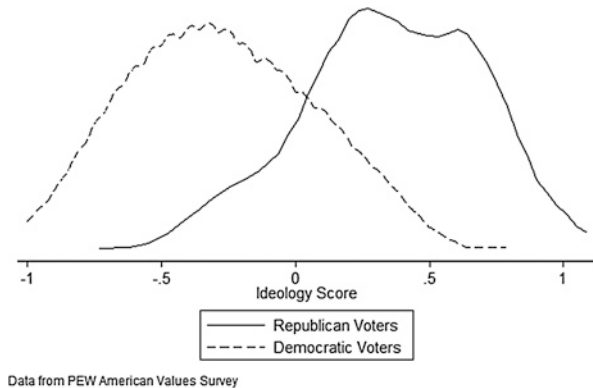

Data from PEW American Values Survey

Fig. 2.7   Ideological distribution of the American Electorate, by party: 2012

the distribution. More voters are taking ideologically extreme positions in 2012 than were in 1987. Not only has policy moderation decreased, there has been a significant increase in the number of voters who display partisan policy preferences suggesting that party sorting has also led to an increase in ideological extremism.

As the ideological distance between partisan voters has increased, so too has partisan acrimony. In a report titled "Partisanship and Political Acrimony in 2016," the *Pew Research Center* finds that 55% of Democrats profess to being afraid the Republican Party, while 49% of
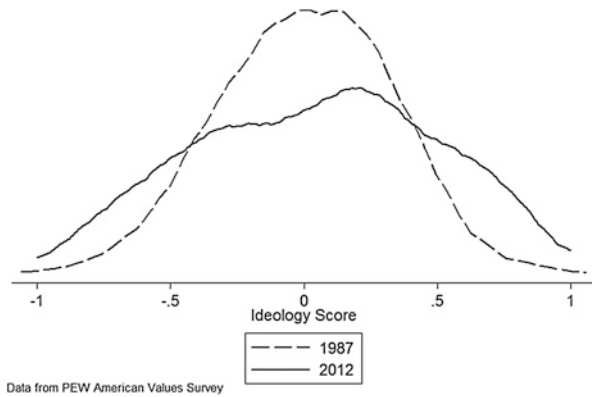
Fig. 2.8 Decline in ideological moderates since 1987

Republicans say the same about the Democratic Party. The findings are even more concerning when only regular voters are considered. When non-voters are removed 72% of Democrats and 62% of Republicans report being afraid of the opposition party. When asked whether members of the opposition party are more closed-minded, lazy, dishonest, and unintelligent, 70% of Democrats report that Republicans are more close-minded than other Americans and 46% of Republicans report that Democrats are lazier than other Americans. Republicans and Democrats are almost evenly split about whether talking to people they disagree with politically is stressful and frustrating or interesting and informative. Strong majorities (65% of Republicans and 63% of Democrats) report that those conversations reveal they have less in common with their partisan counterpart than they thought.[2]

Ideological polarization and high levels of partisan acrimony have increased the stakes of elections for partisans. These voters place a higher premium on winning control of government because the policy stakes are significant and because large portions of each party's base views the other party as a tangible threat to the survival of the Republic. *Pew Research Center* also asked partisan voters why they identify as a Republican or a Democrat and the results find that motivation is strongly grounded in policy terms. Both Democratic voters and Republican voters recognize the policy stakes that come with each party's label because of party sorting and issue polarization. Voters know that a Democratic

administration will support one set of policies while Republican administrations will advance another and that increasingly, these policies represent entirely separate world views. Partisans now see each election as a clash of civilizations.

Due to changes in technology, Americans are increasingly living in their own realities; relying on partisan cable news networks, partisan radio programs, and partisan blogs to get their news and information. Republicans became skeptical of most media outlets; relying almost exclusively on *Fox News* for their political news and information. In a 2014 report called "Political Polarization and Media Habits," *Pew Research Center* found that 47% of "consistent conservatives" identified *Fox News* as their primary news sources, whereas "consistent liberals" reported a variety of sources including *CNN* (15%), NPR (13%), *MSNBC* (12%), and the *New York Times* (10%). Reliance on *Fox News* by conservatives was largely motivated by an increasing belief among Republicans that all other mainstream media outlets have a liberal bias. Trust in media had been on the decline in the U.S. for decades. According to *Gallup,* 53% of American said they had a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media in 1997. By 2015 that number had collapsed to 32%, fueled mostly by Republicans but certainly not limited to them.[3]

In the late summer and early fall of 2008, in the heat of that year's presidential election, the American economy crashed. If September 11, 2001, defined the first decade of the new century, the economic collapse in the fall of 2008 defined the second one. By the time, President Obama was sworn into office on January 20, 2009, the economy was hemorrhaging half a million jobs a month, and Congress had already enacted a $700 billion dollar bailout of the banking industry in the form of the *Troubled Asset Relief Program*, more commonly known as TARP. The Great Recession (as it came to be called) could easily have turned into the country's second Great Depression and almost certainly would have without the safe guards put into place after the Great Depression such as unemployment insurance, FDIC insurance, and food stamps as well as massive government intervention. Even before the economic collapse, the American middle class was slowly shrinking, and the working class was struggling. Household income growth since the 1980s was largely stagnant. Instead, much of the growth in consumer spending was being fueled by a massive expansion of credit powered by deregulation. Although wages remained flat and overall inflation low, inflation in

critical areas such as housing, college tuition, and medical insurance was hyper-inflated. Americans were paying their bills, but doing so increasingly via credit such as home equity loans. Free trade policies supported by both parties had led to massive gains in wealth on Wall Street and cheap consumer products, but they had also combined with automation and technology to decimate American manufacturing. When the credit bubble burst so did the financial illusion most Americans had been living under for the past two decades. Credit became scarce and jobs even more so. The government had to step into stimulate the economy and to expand social welfare benefits such as food stamps and unemployment insurance. Cracks in the American political system turned into cleavages.

During the economic recovery over-the-top political rhetoric exploded. If political discourse had coarsened during the Clinton and Bush years, it became downright nasty in the Obama years. Republican politicians quickly learned there was a political price to pay if they pushed back on the rhetoric feeding the Tea Party rebellion (Libby 2014). By the time the so-called bitherism movement got going full steam in 2010 (a movement that would sow the seeds for Donald Trump's 2016 presidential run) most Republican leaders had worked out a way to avoid agreeing with the outlandish claims of their constituents and conservative media allies why simultaneously not discrediting it. Those who didn't or who appeared willing to compromise with the president were targeted for electoral extinction by conservative media figures like Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck. Republicans that were deemed too moderate were labeled as RINOs (Republican in name only) and were challenged in party primaries and some such as Representative Bob Inglis of South Carolina and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor of Virginia lost their party's nomination to Tea Party-backed challengers.

Heading into the 2012 Republican primary there was a full-blown civil war in the GOP, and the 2012 Republican nomination was the first major battle. The 2012 field had a clear front-runner in establishment favorite Mitt Romney; who in long-standing GOP tradition was "next in line" having been the runner-up for the party's 2008 nomination. Although Romney maintained his front-runner status throughout most of the invisible and formal primary seasons, there was historic instability throughout the race as Tea Party Republicans tried to settle on an alternative to Romney who they saw as not only ideologically moderate (bad), but also party of the party's establishment (worse). The right-wing populism that emerged in the wake of the Great Recession differed

from traditional conservatism because it sought to reign in free trade and liberal immigration policies long championed by business conservatives. Romney was the quintessential business Republican. He was overtaken in the polls four times during the invisible and formal primary by four different candidates: Rick Perry in the early fall of 2011, followed by Herman Cain in late fall, then by Newt Gingrich twice (December of 2015 and then again during the South Carolina primary) and finally by Rick Santorum in the middle of February. Not only was Romney being challenged by a series of conservatives, he was also facing a surprising challenge from Libertarian candidate (and sitting Republican House member) Ron Paul. Paul had been a constant presence throughout the primary period polling at between 10% and 15% throughout and shocked the nation when he came in third in Iowa earning 21.43% of the vote.

Although Republican voters eventually coalesced around Mitt Romney, it had been a close call for the party's establishment; which had fought viciously to steer the nomination to Romney. In the end, they held off the insurgency. Many base Republicans felt that Romney had been helped along by the party's establishment, and Ron Paul supporters were furious over the way the media treated the candidate, consistently leaving him out of media coverage as a viable candidate despite his strong performance in Iowa. Romney's loss to Obama in the general election did nothing to heal the growing ideological cleavages appearing in the Republican Party's coalition. Base Republicans argued that had the party nominated a "real" Republican, they would have won the election.

By now, the Tea Party members of Congress had rebranded themselves into the Freedom Caucus. The Freedom Caucus in the House of Representatives was large enough to disrupt the legislative process for then-Speaker of the House John Boehner. The Republican congressional leadership was locked in a two-front war. They were battling President Obama and his Democratic counterparts in the Senate, but the real battle was internal. In 2013, the Freedom Caucus flexed their political muscle in the House and derailed a comprehensive immigration reform bill that had miraculously overcome the filibuster in the Senate and was certain to be signed into law by President Obama. The GOP's willingness to come to the table to pass comprehensive immigration reform was a product of the Republican Party's so-called autopsy report put out after Romney's loss to Obama in the 2012 election. The report, titled the

"Republican National Committee's Growth and Opportunity Report," called for the party to moderate on the issue of illegal immigration[4] and reembrace comprehensive reform that offered some type of opportunity for illegal immigrants already in the country to apply for legal status as well as provide a pathway to citizenship for Dreamers, children who were brought into the country illegally by their parents and then raised as Americans.

The Republican Party's establishment saw triangulation on the issue of immigration reform as a necessary move if they hoped to be competitive in national elections moving forward because of projected growth of Latino voters and their sharp turn away from the GOP since George W. Bush's reelection in 2004. In the Senate, the "Gang of Eight" senators formed to draft up the legislation.[5] Mitch McConnell worked hard behind the scenes to keep enough of his caucus together to overcome the filibuster. When the bill was passed by the Senate by a vote of 68–32 on June 27, 2013, it made national headlines because it was the first piece of major legislation passed in the Senate since the *Affordable Care Act* (Obamacare) was passed in 2010, and because it had managed to receive support from an astounding fourteen Senate Republicans, eight more than was required to the overcome the filibuster.

Fearing massive reprisals from the Freedom Caucus in the House as well as a revolt within the Republican Party's base Speaker Boehner refused to bring the bill up to the House floor for a vote, where it almost certainly would have passed with robust bipartisan support. Citing the "Hastert Rule," an unofficial Republican rule in the House that requires legislation receive a "majority of the majority." Boehner shelved the bill fearing that passing it would cost him his speakership. Despite killing the bill Boehner's #2 in the House, Majority Leader Eric Cantor was challenged in his primary by a Tea Party Republican challenger who used the immigration bill to paint Cantor as a moderate. Cantor's improbable defeat was one of the biggest upsets in political history; it sent shockwaves through the rest of the Republican Party, especially those serving partisan gerrymandered districts.

By the conclusion of the 2014 midterms, the Republican Party saw the ranks of their Freedom Caucus swell to more than sixty members in the House of Representatives, and they had an agenda: challenge the political establishment and advance a hardline conservative agenda no matter the cost. Speaker Boehner found himself in a constant battle against his own caucus. After nine months and facing another coup

attempt Speaker Boehner announced suddenly that he was retiring.[6] The relief in the Speaker's demeanor was palpable; after more than three years fighting his own party members he was free. The aftermath of Boehner's unexpected retirement revealed just how deep the fissures in the Republican Party had become. Cantor had long been considered to be Boehner's heir apparent to the speakership, but was purged the year before. Boehner's new #2 was Kevin McCarthy, a representative from California. Almost immediately there was a sharp backlash to McCarthy. After driving Boehner out, the Freedom Caucus was not about to replace Speaker Boehner with another mainstream Republican. Facing a loss, McCarthy abruptly removed his name from the running just moments before the vote was scheduled to be held.[7]

The month that followed was remarkable. The one consensus candidate for the job, a fiscal hawk and former vice presidential nominee Paul Ryan, initially rejected it out of hand. After seeing what happened to John Boehner and Eric Cantor, Ryan worried that taking on the speakership would hurt him politically among the party's base by making him the new target of the Freedom Caucus. Representatives Darryl Issa and Jason Chaffetz both put their names into consideration but with caveats; both were willing to withdraw if Paul Ryan decided he wanted the job after all.[8] On October 20, 2015, after a month of uncertainty and chaos, Paul Ryan called a press conference where he agreed to consider running for the speakership provided House Republicans agreed to certain conditions. Ryan said he would agree to run only because it was a "dire moment," but in exchange, he demanded endorsements from all of the Republican caucuses; including the Freedom Caucus. No doubt thinking of John Boehner's experience, Ryan said: "I'm willing to take arrows in my chest but not in the back."[9] On October 29, 2016, Paul Ryan was confirmed as the new Speaker of the House earning the support of most, but not all of the members of the Freedom Caucus.[10] Boehner's resignation after a career spent coveting the speakership and Paul Ryan's hesitation to take the third most powerful position in American politics would foreshadow the tumultuous Republican primary that was already beginning to spin out of control of the party's establishment with the surprising status of an unexpected front-runner: Donald J. Trump.

Despite controlling the White House and achieving major legislative accomplishments early in the Obama Administration, the base of the Democratic Party was also growing frustrated with the status quo. Although most still approved of the President, many progressive

Democrats saw Obama's failure to enact immigration reform and other progressive policies as a lack of will rather than a product of the unprecedented obstructionism he faced by congressional Republicans. Like their Republican counterparts, the economic recession had pushed the base of the party further toward economic populism. President Obama found himself fighting his own party's base to pass the Trans-Pacific Trade deal, more commonly known as the TPP. Despite initially calling it the "gold standard" for trade deals, Hillary Clinton back-tracked on her support for the trade deal as backlash within the Democratic base grew. Clinton was also taking flack for her relationship with Wall Street, which she established while serving as a New York Senator.

Although short-lived, the economic crisis had also given rise to a populist movement on the left: Occupy Wall Street. Emerging in September of 2011, OWS emerged to draw attention to economic inequality which had been significantly exasperated by the financial collapse. For several months, protestors had occupied Zuccotti Park in the financial district of Manhattan and staged a series of protests. Where the Tea Party movement moved quickly from protest to infiltration of Republican politics at the local, state, and federal level, Occupy Wall Street did not identify themselves as part of the Democratic Party and after the initial energy dissipated the movement collapsed. However, anti-establishment sentiment remained in the progressive wing of the party. Hillary Clinton was the poster child for everything progressives hated about the Democratic Party. She was an insider, an elitist, a pragmatist, and ideologically moderate; the antithesis of the kind of president progressives sought to succeed Obama.

In the meantime, Hillary Clinton was also under attack by the Republican Party who saw her 2016 candidacy as all but evitable. Although there were legitimate concerns regarding the attacks on the U.S. embassy in Libya following the overthrow of long-term dictator Muammar Gaddafi, the Republicans intentionally politicized Benghazi with the goal of eroding Clinton's popularity coming off of her tenure as Secretary of State which ended in 2013 shortly after President Obama's second term began.

The Benghazi attacks occurred on September 11, 2011, right as the 2012 Republican primaries were beginning in earnest. Initially, Republicans raised legitimate concerns over public statements by the administration regarding the motivations for the attacks as well as the State Department's response as the attacks unfolded. The embassy

attacks led to the deaths of Ambassador Chris Stevens as well as three other Americans working at the embassy. Although U.S. embassies had been attacked dozens of times over the past decade leading to twenty deaths of embassy personnel,[11] the Benghazi attack was the only one to lead to the death of an ambassador since the 1970s.[12]

After an internal State Department investigation ruled the event an accident and suspended four State Department officials for negligence; the House launched the first of what would become seven congressional probes into the matter. From the beginning, it was clear that congressional Republicans hoped to find negligence on Clinton's part. Although each investigation focused on particular aspects of the attacks and identified weaknesses in the State Department's security measures none produced evidence of culpability for Clinton.[13] However, after the conclusion of the sixth investigation, a *Freedom of Information Act* request (FOIA) from a conservative group revealed that for part of Clinton's tenure she had used a private email address hosted on a separate server. The revelation allowed the investigation to be reopened, this time with the private email server and potential mishandling of classified information as the focus. Despite failing to produce evidence of criminality by Secretary Clinton, the investigations eventually eroded the public's confidence in Clinton and tarnished what had been up until then a well-received tenure as Secretary of State.

In what *Washington Post* reporter E.J. Dionne called a "truthful gaffe" House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy told *Fox News* host Sean Hannity in an interview that the repeated investigations into Clinton were a "strategy to fight and win." The majority leader went on to say, "Everybody thought Hillary Clinton was unbeatable, right? But we put together a Benghazi special committee, a select committee. What are her numbers today? Her numbers are dropping. Why? Because she's untrustable [sic]. But no one would have known any of that had happened, had we not fought."[14] In context, McCarthy's comments came when he was under consideration to assume the speakership position after Boehner stepped down. McCarthy was on the defensive; being hammered by Hannity about whether congressional Republicans were doing enough to thwart President Obama's agenda. McCarthy offered the comment as evidence that House Republican leadership would better meet the demands of the party's base under his tutelage.[15]
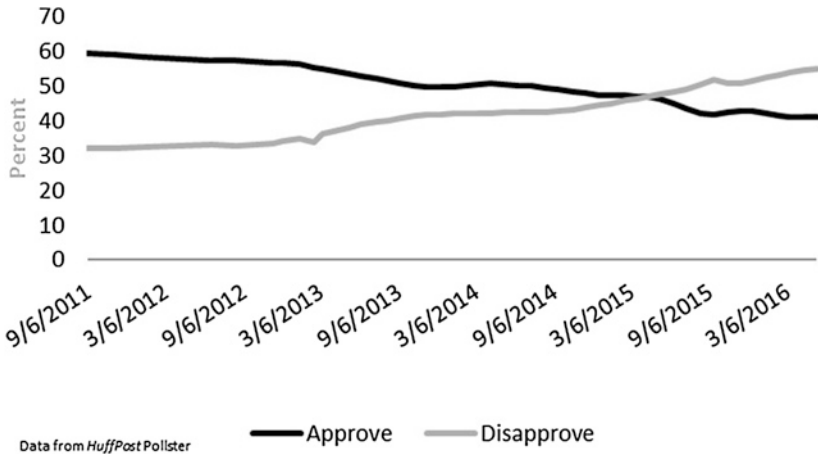
Fig. 2.9 Hillary Clinton approval ratings

Examining Clinton's approval rating over time reveals the effect that sustained investigations had on her favorability ratings. As Fig. 2.9 shows when the Benghazi attacks happened in late 2011, Clinton had a very high favorability rating of 59%. Two years after the attacks, Clinton's rating still remained positive despite already undergoing several investigations as well as a high-profile testimony in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in January of 2013 as she prepared to leave office. Clinton's favorable/unfavorable ratio didn't inverse until the end of April 2015; nearly four years after the attacks. It would never return to positive territory. Whether by strategic design or by pure luck, the effect was the same: Four years of sustained investigations turned Clinton from one of the most popular political figures in the country into one of the least popular and neutralized one of Clinton's strongest assets: her tenure as Secretary of State.

Clinton's history as an economic centrist, combined with increasing fallout from the Benghazi investigations made her ripe for a challenge from the progressive wing of the party for the Democratic nomination. There was virtually no dissention in the party's establishment as to who should be the party's nominee, even after Clinton's popularity began to erode in late 2014. Democrats saw the later Benghazi committees as a partisan witch hunt and a poorly disguised attempt by the Republicans

to derail her candidacy. Even as the public was beginning to move away from Clinton, partisan Democrats were digging in their heels—a decision they would later come to regret.

After the death of his son from brain cancer, Vice President Joe Biden decided to sit out. His decision was almost certainly helped along by the clear signals being sent by Democratic superdelegates, who had begun lining up behind Clinton as early as 2013. The progressive wing of the party saw her candidacy as a coronation but didn't show any appetite for other candidates considering runs like the former governor of Maryland Martin O'Malley. Despite the growing populism in the Democratic base, Massachusetts Senator and progressive firebrand Elizabeth Warren declined to run, being far too shrewd a politician to go up against the Clinton machine. But Bernie Sanders, an Independent Senator from Vermont, had no such inhibitions. Wanting to pressure Clinton from the left, he threw his hat into the ring hoping to give progressives a voice in the process. He almost certainly never expected to see his candidacy explode, turning from an advocacy campaign to a viable contender for the Democratic Party's nomination. The Democratic Party, like their Republican counterparts, had seriously underestimated the strength of the anti-establishment sentiment in the electorate. And like Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders offered voters the chance for a political revolution.

Notes

1. Vital Statistics on Congress, The Brookings Institute, https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/vital-statistics-on-congress/.
2. "Partisanship and Animosity in 2016," Pew Research Center, http://www.people-press.org/2016/06/22/partisanship-and-political-animosity-in-2016/.
3. Art Swift, "Americans' Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low." *Gallup*, http://www.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx.
4. "Growth and Opportunity Report," Republican National Committee, https://www.gop.com/growth-and-opportunity-project/.
5. "Gang of Eight" Senate Proposal to Overhaul the Immigration System, *Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/apps/g/page/politics/gang-of-eight-senate-proposal-to-overhaul-the-immigration-system/106/.

6. Jake Sherman, Anna Palmer, John Bresnahan, and Lauren French, "John Boehner Heads for Exits," *Politico*, http://www.politico.com/story/2015/09/speaker-john-boehner-retiring-from-congress-at-the-end-of-october-214056.

7. Susan Davis, "Paul Ryan Doesn't Want to be Speaker But These Republicans Do," *NPR*, http://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/10/14/448408383/paul-ryan-doesnt-want-to-be-speaker-but-these-republicans-do.

8. Bill Hoffman, "Rep. Paul Ryan 'Seriously Considering' Speakership Bid," *Newsmax*, http://www.newsmax.com/Headline/paul-ryan-considers-house-speaker/2015/10/09/id/695457/.

9. Robert Costa and Mike DeBonis, "Paul Ryan will run for House speaker, under certain conditions," *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2015/10/20/scenes-from-the-house-gop-conference-meeting-where-everyone-is-waiting-on-paul-ryan/?utm_term=.e1686eee3828.

10. Mike DeBonis and Robert Costa, "'Supermajority' of House Freedom Caucus to back Paul Ryan's speaker bid," The *Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/supermajority-of-house-freedom-caucus-to-back-paul-ryans-speaker-bid/2015/10/21/d7411964-781e-11e5-a958-d889faf561dc_story.html?utm_term=.b13764e1e48a.

11. "A List of Deadly Terrorist Attacks on U.S. Diplomatic Targets Under President George W. Bush, 2001–2009," *Politifact*, http://www.politifact.com/embassyattacks/.

12. "Attacks on U.S. diplomatic facilities," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attacks_on_U.S._diplomatic_facilities.

13. *Politifact*, http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2015/oct/12/hillary-clinton/clinton-there-have-been-7-benghazi-probes-so-far/.

14. "Kevin McCarthy's truthful gaffe on Benghazi," *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/kevin-mccarthys-truthful-gaffe/2015/09/30/f12a9fac-67a8-11e5-8325-a42b5a459b1e_story.html?utm_term=.b6776a929d9d.

15. *Politifact*, http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2015/oct/07/context-what-kevin-mccarthy-said-about-hillary-cli/.

References

Abramowitz, Alan I. *The Polarized Public? Why our Government is so Dysfunctional*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2013.

Grossmann, Matt, and David A. Hopkins. *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Levendusky, Matthew. The Partisan Sort How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Libby, Ronald T. *Purging the Republican Party: Tea Party Campaigns and Elections.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014.

McCarty, Nolan M., Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches. Cambridge, Massachusetts: London, England: The MIT Press, 2016.