

# This year's upside-down election is part of a political realignment which encompasses both parties, and is fueled by public rancor.

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*In his final of three articles commenting on major political realignments, [Walter Dean Burnham](#) looks at the 2016 election picture as of early summer 2016. He writes that on the Republican Party side, establishment candidates such as former Florida Governor Jeb Bush have been flatly rejected by the party's base, in favor of Donald Trump who is rapidly filling the GOP's voter vacuum. For the Democrats, while former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has the support of the party establishment, the insurgent candidacy of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders points to the party's own 'runaway electorate'.*



## The Republicans: The Case of Donald Trump and his 'Establishment' Enemies

The Republican Party is the partial beneficiary of a critical realignment that hit the electoral system in 2010: a clearly strongly partisan surge that cased the party to win 63 House seats from the Democrats, more than 500 legislative seats among the states, and a strong majority of Republican governors. This swing continued in the next off-year election, 2014, with the Republican Party winning a 54-46 majority in the US Senate. Only the presidency has so far eluded the GOP's grasp. Otherwise, the political structure of Gilded Age II is almost complete. And, step by step, the GOP has shifted its center of gravity to the extreme right.

This impressive score of party success makes it the more surprising that the party's elite 'establishment' and its preferred presidential candidates, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush and Senator Marco Rubio (also from the Sunshine State), were flatly rejected by that part of the GOP's base that votes in primary elections or goes to caucuses. One thinks of the first verse of the second Psalm: "Why do the nations so furiously rage together? And why do the people imagine a vain thing?"

Donald J. Trump, the New York real-estate developer, entered the Republican race nomination in midsummer 2015. It is said that he entered to win about 10 percent of the primary-election vote as a 'protest' candidate. Instead, he encountered a huge vacuum in the GOP voter base and rapidly (and by all accounts, permanently) filled it. Trump thus became the clear front-runner for the nomination at the party convention to be held in Cleveland in July 2016.

The 'establishment' – key multimillion-dollar donors and party leaders – completely lost control of the situation. Their first preference, Jeb Bush, was lavishly funded, but could not win even 10 percent of the primary vote. The voters, many flocking to the Trump insurgency, simply refused to buy what Bush was selling. The 'establishment' forces did not mobilize in a Stop-Trump effort until the spring of 2016. And by then, their candidate of choice was the ultra-right Senator from Texas, Ted Cruz, of all people (on the other hand, water does tend to find its own level...).

It seems obvious that the reason for this elite failure lies in the long-term development in the political economy – first visible in the 1990s, radically accelerated by the 'impossible' slump of 2007-2009 – toward a bifurcated socio-economic base of politics. Typified in the very rapid increase of socioeconomic inequality, these developments generated stagnation, and worse, in the jobs-and-wages prospects of those with no college education and located especially in manufacturing. Those, on the other hand, who were in higher-tech occupations and extensive post-High School education were shielded to a large extent from the negative impact of globalization, job-destroying trade agreements (e.g. NAFTA) and very rapid high-tech transformations of the US economy.

The policies involved were supported by the elites of both parties. It was Democrats – e.g. Treasury Secretary Larry Summers and President Bill Clinton – who led the way to the 1999 repeal of the 1933 Glass-Steagall Act, which had

erected a firewall between investment banking and commercial banking. Both set of elites concentrated their attention on the better-off segment of the labor force, and neglected the stresses absorbed especially by those millions who were in a worse-off position. In 2015/16 Trump was on hand to fill the gap on the Republican side, and in his words, to “Make America Great Again.”

## **The Democrats: The Proposed Coronation of Hillary Clinton and the Insurgence of Bernard Sanders**

There remain very clear, indeed polarized differences, between the elites and voter clienteles of the two parties. At the same time, the development of political responses to globalization, high-tech innovations, etc. from the 1990s to the 2010s was largely symmetrical or bilateral.

The Democratic elite have consolidated around Hillary Clinton. African-Americans very solidly support her candidacy. But there were, and are, weaknesses. A socialist from one of the tiniest of states, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, has launched a successful insurgency. This was so successful that, in the wake of his very solid defeat of Clinton in the April 2016 Wisconsin primary, Sanders went on to win six of the seven primary contests which followed. If, to use British economic historian Arnold Toynbee’s words, Trump was a “savior with a time machine” pointing back to an idolized past state of affairs, Sanders was such a “savior” with a futurist message, even of “Revolution.”

Both sets of runaway electorates reflect the underlying reality: as a political structure, the Constitution of 1789 is under huge stress. The legitimacy of the *res publica* (Latin: “The Public Thing”) is so eroded that the only major institutions of government which is still well respected in 2016 is the US military. “Saviors with time machines” come into serious view only when large parts of a population find the present state of public affairs to be intolerable.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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Walter Dean Burnham is Professor Emeritus at the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. Professor Burnham is best known for his work on the dynamics of American politics (particularly electoral politics). His chief areas of concentration have been on the causes, characteristics and consequences of critical realignments in American history, and the modern-day decay of partisan linkages between rulers and ruled. Much of his recent work has also concentrated on the “turnout problem” and its relationship to other elements of change in American politics. Before coming to Texas in 1988, he was Ruth and Arthur Sloan Professor of Political Science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



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