

# COMPARISON OF THIS ELECTION TO YEARS PAST

By Alex Hanson

Even in what seems to be the era of rabid-partisans in American politics, just about everyone can agree on one thing — this election cycle has been anything but normal, and no one could have predicted where we are now.

As potential candidates started packing for Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina as far back as late 2014, the approval rating of Congress, according to Gallup, was barely out of the double-digits. President Obama's approval rating was hovering under 50 percent. Most people would agree we were in a divided country politically.

In particular, the Republican Party was viewed less favorably than the Democratic Party, and in many areas, voters registered as "No Party" outnumbered both parties.

But 2016 was supposed to be a reset for the Republican Party.

They had rising political stars, alternatives to attract new voters and names everyone knew — from Scott

Walker, Jeb Bush, Chris Christie, and John Kasich to Marco Rubio, Rand Paul, Ted Cruz, and Ben Carson.

Party Chairman Reince Priebus said the GOP had to be "perfect" to win in 2016, and much of the polling between Republicans mentioned above showed a head-to-head match or a lead over frontrunner Clinton.

Then on June 16, 2015, business mogul Donald Trump entered the race. While many immediately blew Trump off as an outsider with no chance, he got everyone's attention during his announcement speech.

"Sadly, the American dream is dead," Trump said at Trump Tower in New York City. "But if I get elected president I will bring it back bigger and better and stronger than ever

before, and we will make America great again.”

Those two sentences would become commonplace for his campaign speeches: A mix of populism appealing to struggling Americans, and many adjectives to describe how he would revitalize the American economy.

But the June 16 speech also brought part one of what would become commonplace in his campaign.

“When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best,” he said. “They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”

It was the first time Trump would take a hit from his opponents over comments he made. By the time he wrapped up the nomination, it wasn’t just for comments on immigrants — he would at some point take hits for comments on women, veterans, and religious groups.

From there, even as most big election stories focused on something Trump said that offended a group of individuals, or a personal attack on a fellow Republican, his poll numbers shot up and one-by-one, Republican candidates slowly dropped out — all the way to the Republican National Convention where Trump easily won the roll call vote to become the party’s official candidate.

## How Did Trump Beat 16 Other Candidates?

“Divide and conquer,” says Steffen Schmidt, an Iowa State university professor of political science who

has studied American politics and elections for decades.

“If there had been only four other Republicans in the caucuses and primaries, Trump would not have won,” Schmidt said. “Establishment Republicans would have supported Rubio and Jeb Bush, Evangelicals rallied around Cruz, and Libertarians could have voted for Rand Paul.

If those typical “lanes” for support for each candidate would have lined up, the support for Trump would have been small enough to allow a more traditional candidate to win.

Instead, 17 major name candidates ended up crisscrossing the country, 10 made it onto the prime time debate stage ahead of voting in the Iowa Caucus on February 1.

“The GOP basically surrendered its process to a bunch of marginal candidates with no chance to win,” Schmidt said. “Fiorina, Jindal, Huckabee, Santorum, etc., and as a result of all the others splitting polls and votes, Trump won with only a few more votes than anyone else. It’s all in the mathematics.”

But it’s not just the Republican Party that almost handed their nomination to an “outsider.”

On the Democratic side, who would’ve thought a 74-year-old socialist senator from Vermont could possibly beat Hillary Clinton — perhaps the most well-known female politician in America?

Sanders, now known to most as an ardent defender of a stronger social safety net, such as things like expanded Social Security, free tuition at public colleges and single-payer healthcare, came within a percentage point of defeating Clinton at the Iowa Caucus.

The raucous crowds, often filled with millennial-aged college students, looked much more enthused with Sanders than the idea of another Clinton in the White House.

“[The Democratic Party] neglected to patrol the periphery of the party and Sanders snuck under the fence,” Schmidt said.

Clinton would ultimately win the Democratic nomination, but Sanders and his progressive movement won 23 states. Sanders would later endorse Hillary Clinton in the race for president, warning Trump would be much more damaging than what he warned about Clinton during the primary.

“There has never been anything like this because parties allow outsiders, who do not represent the party ideology, to hijack the party,” Schmidt said.

## The End of Any Respect or Decency in American Politics?

With all the personal attacks — from both Trump and Clinton — many wonder if we’ve reached a low point in political discourse. While Trump has many times taken personal attacks at not just Clinton, but his former opponent and members of the Republican Party, even Clinton came under fire for calling a chunk of Trump supporters a “basket of deplorables.”

After 46 years at Iowa State studying politics, Schmidt says the level of personal attacks is what stands out the most.

“It’s just nastier,” Schmidt said. “And more unbelievable that now there are people running for president on a major party ticket who either have such a horrible scandalous background that the party should have

picked somebody else, but couldn't because she was the chosen one, or the Republicans picked someone who hasn't run for anything, but they're trying hard to defend the fact that he is their candidate. It's just the deterioration of politics."

Some thought Trump's negative image would have an affect down ballot, but Republicans running for reelection have done a pretty decent job of portraying their own image, Schmidt said.

"Everyone thought Donald Trump was going to destroy [their majorities], and that would have been bad, bad, bad, but it looks like people are saying, 'Well, I like Grassley, but not Trump, so I'll vote Grassley, maybe Trump, but maybe I will just skip that?'" Schmidt said.

But personal attacks and politicians acting naughty isn't anything new in American politics, said Mack Shelley, professor and chair of Iowa State's political science department.

Trump can bring up Bill Clinton's past, and media reports can bring up Trump's indecency, but even dating back to the 1800's, politics have been filled with scandals.

For example, Andrew Jackson won election back in 1832, establishing the modern Democratic Party, Shelley said. Jackson had an affair with Rachel, who would later become his wife. At the time, Rachel was married to another man.

"American politics is replete with this sort of thing," Shelley said. "I guess in contemporary terms up until now we've been sort of restrained."

Back in 2016, Schmidt also pointed to the second on the tickets: Indiana Governor Mike Pence and Virginia Senator Tim Kaine. Take a stump speech from those two and compare them to their running mate at the top, and you end up with an entirely different tone while they speak — almost sounding unnatural compared to what we're used to in this cycle.

"They're good," Schmidt said, adding he's heard from Republicans and Democrats alike all cycle hoping that the second on the ticket could somehow move up or become president after the election.

"The second on the ticket is okay with a lot more people than the top of the ticket," Schmidt said. "It's very unusual."

*Photo by: Jessica Darland*





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**Mack Shelley,**

Professor and chair of ISU's political science department



*Photo by: Max Goldberg/Iowa State Daily*



### Third Party Candidates Disrupt?

No third party candidates were invited to the presidential debate this cycle, something Libertarian Gary Johnson said would be critical for a third party candidate to have a chance to win the White House.

But even without a third party candidate on stage, Johnson and Green Party nominee Jill Stein have dug into the usual domination of Democrats and Republicans. While it's unlikely Johnson, Stein, or any other third party or independent candidate will win any state, the sometimes double-digit polling from the candidates may be enough to cost either Trump or Clinton a state and tilt the election one way or the other.

For example, in New Mexico, usually a blue state, in any other cycle, Clinton should easily win. Johnson,

the former New Mexico governor, polled at 24 percent in late September, according to a poll conducted by the Albuquerque Journal. With Johnson at 24 percent and Clinton at just 35 percent, Trump is within striking distance at 31 percent.

A bump toward Johnson with Democrats disgusted at the race, or independents toward Trump could tilt the race for Republicans.

In other states, Johnson polls anywhere between five percent and close to 15 percent. Stein, a bit lower, is pulling a few percentage points.

Johnson, a former Republican governor, also ran in 2012, bringing in over a million votes, around one percent of the popular vote. Johnson points to the disgust of the two-party system this time around for the tens

of millions of Americans who at this point are planning to support him.

"Has the two-party division that the founders railed against become today's political status quo?" Johnson wrote in the Washington Post. "It doesn't have to be. With the Republicans and the Democrats having nominated their most polarizing presidential candidates in more than a generation, now is the moment for a third way."

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Going forward past November's election, despite who wins, political watchers will look back and see a 2016 election that was unpredictable; the impact going forward on political discourse and political attitudes may be just as unpredictable.



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# WHERE DO THE CANDIDATES STAND?



## CRIMINAL JUSTICE

**T:** In favor of death penalty, believes in strong police force and the police force are the most mistreated people in America.

**C:** Believes in systemic reform in justice system, and would reform mandatory sentencing.



## MONEY

**T:** Would bring back jobs from China and Mexico, decrease funding to the EPA, military and Department of Education.

**C:** Wants to streamline wasteful and redundant programs.



## CLIMATE CHANGE

**T:** Does not favor renewable energy sources, wants to cut the EPA and use eminent domain.

**C:** Favors investment in renewable energy as a means to address climate change.

**T:** Donald Trump  
**C:** Hillary Clinton



## IMMIGRATION

**T:** Wants to build a wall.

**C:** Believes in immigration reform with path to citizenship, border control has been "zeroed out".



## COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY

**T:** Federal government should not profit off of student loans.

**C:** Has a college affordability plan.



## FOREIGN POLICY

**T:** Would re-negotiate most of America's current engagements and opposes military involvement in the Middle East.

**C:** Accepts the current framework of American engagement with allies around the world, favors keeping America engaged military.



## NATIONAL DEFENSE

**T:** Wants to bring back waterboarding, charge rich countries more if we defend them.

**C:** Would take Syrian refugees and fights the privationization of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).



## GUN CONTROL

**T:** Thinks mental health needs to be addressed, not gun control.

**C:** Wants to expand background check, close loopholes.



## PLANNED PARENTHOOD

**T:** Would defend it.

**C:** Would make wealthy pay for it.



## HEALTH CARE

**T:** Thinks Obamacare was a mess, doesn't want to individually mandate health insurance, wants to remove cross-state barriers to solve insurance issues, taking care of poor people is not a single-payer responsibility, replace Obamacare with health savings account.

**C:** Looking into universal health care, Medicare for all is not economically feasible, VA needs to be re-vamped, supports vaccines, taxpayers pay too much for medicines.