

NATIONAL REVIEW

Will the Political Establishment Be Trumped by The Donald?

By David Paul Kuhn — August 22, 2015

Donald Trump does not merely represent a challenge to the Republican establishment. He is an affront to the professionalization of politics. Here is a man who soared to the front of the Republican field without strategists, pollsters, ad men, set designers, or spinners. Politics is a multi-billion dollar industry. Ironically, the billionaire real-estate mogul is the latest reminder of a fact that political professionals have an incentive to ignore — political success often cannot be purchased.

Trump has also forced the highbrow to acknowledge that politics tends to thrive below the neck. Reporters and commentators are paid to take the political horse race seriously. Most of the race's "events" do not make presidents. But a contest wins an audience. The media thrives off the political hype. Trump has not brought the show to American politics. He captures how much of our politics already is a show.

So we watch the Big Show's new star. Trump has led the Republican race for one month. And he's still being dismissed. [David Brooks](#) explained on *PBS NewsHour* that Trump "isn't going away but he's not going to get votes." Brooks clarified, "Much less [votes] than he polls. His voters are what they call low information voters. That is, people who don't pay attention to politics."

PEROT, THE SEQUEL

Yet we have seen this constituency make political history before. Recall that other outlandish businessman who challenged a Bush and a Clinton. Ross Perot won a staggering 19 percent of the vote in 1992. And exit polls show that he did it with the help of Republican voters. About two thirds of his supporters said that they backed George H.W. Bush in 1988. More said they backed Ronald Reagan. By 2000, most

Perot voters returned to the Republican fold.

Like Perot, Trump's base is white, more male than female, more working class than not. Yet more than a third of Perot's supporters were college-educated in 1992. Polls show Trump is winning the well-educated vote as well.

How could this be? So goes the primal scream of the GOP graybeards. Channeling that angst, George Will wrote that Trump is a "counterfeit Republican and no conservative." Perot demonstrated, however, that large swaths of GOP voters would support someone who breaks with Republican orthodoxy. As many now forget, Perot supported abortion rights and opposed the first Gulf War. He also bucked Republicans more than Democrats with his opposition to NAFTA, and what he called the "giant sucking sound" of jobs going south to Mexico. Does that sound like a certain candidate today?

Trump's supporters are not focusing on his past stands, but rather where he stands now and what he stands most against. Every time a political maven sniffs at Trump, his supporters recall what they love about him.

Many Republicans, however belatedly, now recognize Trump as a dire threat. Trump says he is leaving the third-party door open for leverage. If he walks through that door, he will almost surely sink Republicans in the presidential race.

Americans are not a two-party people, but rather a people with a two-party system. In most elections, the public is forced to choose the lesser of two evils. But occasionally outsiders will upset this unnatural order. By winning less than 3 percent of the vote in 2000, Ralph Nader likely made George W. Bush president.

Today, three in ten Republicans do *not* have a favorable view of the Republican party. That's twice the rate of Democrats when asked about their party. In early August, Rasmussen found that more than a third of likely Republican voters say they would vote for Trump on a third-party ticket; nearly a fifth said they "very likely" would. Here lies the Republican nightmare.

Of course, the leader of the Republican field could actually win the Republican field. Trump's current support spans the GOP tent. The crass reality-television star even leads among Evangelicals. Yet even if the span of that support narrows, Trump can maintain a solid base of support. The Trump-Perot bloc is not as embedded in the GOP

foundation as groups such as the religious Right. But Perot demonstrated that this bloc is solid enough to break presidents.

THE FRONT-RUNNER IS STILL NOT THE FAVORITE

As the sustainability of Trump's bloc becomes more apparent, the chattering class may soon shift from laughing at Trump to taking him too seriously. Despite his standing, he's not the favorite for the GOP nomination. That's not because Trump's too careless with his words or that most Americans dislike him. True, nearly six in ten Americans have an unfavorable view of him. But Trump's image remains malleable. He's new to the main stage of American politics. Trump's unfavorable standing is also only slightly worse or, depending upon the poll, equivalent to Bush and Clinton. Pundits are not declaring the demise of those dynasties.

Ronald Reagan's path to the White House reminds us that outlandish comments do not sink all candidates. Reagan also demonstrated that debates are won by broad strokes, not fine points. But many forget today how practiced Reagan was by the time he won the presidency. He had been at the fore of the conservative movement since the sixties.

Trump's challenge is sailing on his Reagan-esque slogan of "make America great again" without sounding un-presidential and un-American. In 1996, Pat Buchanan trumpeted views on immigration similar to Trump. He soared but soon crashed. Trump has far more staying power than Buchanan. That's where Trump's money matters. He also befits the television age. But Trump lacks Buchanan's verbal dexterity and depth, and he lacks not only Reagan's experience but also his grace.

TRUMP THE TYPICAL

It may never get that far. The political seers' initial instinct might prove correct. Trump could implode. But now many discuss Trump as if he were impervious to electoral physics. All candidates are mortal, even Trump, and his mouth could still be his undoing. If that occurs, it will not be because he offended the media, Democrats or GOP mandarins. Trump will crash if he offends or disappoints those who stand with him.

Little about Trump is actually exceptional. Presidential campaigns have beckoned showmen and showmanship since log-cabin floats were rolled out for the Virginia

aristocrat William Henry Harrison. Wealth and garishness have never been an obstacle to populism — Huey Long wore white linen suits and pink ties and drove a Cadillac. The poor still saw themselves in him. Washington bigwigs called Long a clown. Then Long came to Washington and began a national movement. And the establishment stopped laughing.

Few serious minds are laughing at Trump anymore. Even if Trump left the race tomorrow, aftershocks would endure. He is forcing Republicans to talk about birthright citizenship. The GOP cannot win the White House unless its Hispanic support polls at least in the mid-thirties.

But Trump has also reminded Republicans that they need to appear as more Dubya than Romney. He has heightened interest in the GOP race, and he's good for candidates such as Jeb Bush, John Kasich, and Marco Rubio. He not only steals the thunder from Ted Cruz or Rand Paul, he makes all the activist candidates look like typical pols. If you're a mainstream candidate, you want Trump on stage making you look like the adult in the room. In this sense, the current star might still assist his replacement.

This is the rosy Republican scenario. It presumes that the cast drastically shrinks, Trump is forced to confront veteran Republicans at length, and the mainstream candidates find their grit and expose Trump as more bluster than ballast. Then, as Trump dodges and double-speaks, it happens. The outsider proves just another politician. And the politician prevails by heeding the lessons of the outsider. This is how primary campaigns often end.

Yet the lessons of history remind us that outsiders — and their “low information voters” — sometimes alter that storyline. Trump is not something new in American politics. He *is* American politics.

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