

How the 1980 Election Set the Stage for Donald Trump

Ronald Reagan won a convincing popular and electoral victory in 1980. Campaigning for income tax cuts, smaller government and a resolute stand against communism, Reagan earned a mandate to carry out his conservative vision. Part of his victory was owed to millions of culturally conservative, blue collar, non-college educated voters in places like Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan and elsewhere experiencing the first wave of economic dislocation and insecurity brought on by recession and inflation. These Reagan Democrats were not traditional Republican voters and certainly not the country club, chamber of commerce and educated suburbanites that made up the Republican Party.

Two other forces emerged from Reagan's victory, however. George Herbert Walker Bush swept into the vice presidency as Ronald Reagan's running mate. After a political career that included two Senate losses in Texas, two House victories in Texas, and a failed campaign for president in 1980, Ronald Reagan breathed new life into Bush as the new vice president. While in Arkansas meanwhile, the young governor, Bill Clinton, lost his reelection in a dramatic political upset. The Bush win in 1980 and the Clinton loss in 1980 would set in motion two forces that would dominate American politics for the next 36 years and ignore the Reagan Democrats at their peril.

For Bush, the vice presidency created a Rolodex of donors, the politically connected and the establishment that helped fuel and finance his presidential ambitions. His association with Reagan was the affirmation for some conservatives to support him. His election to the presidency in 1988 was a result of incumbency, the popularity of Reagan, extensive establishment support and a division among conservatives that began after Reagan. His kinder, gentler candidacy was an appeal to the

moderate center and not Reagan Democrats. Though he won a convincing victory in the afterglow of Ronald Reagan, the coalition that elected Reagan was faint and unenthusiastic for the new president.

For Bill and Hillary Clinton, an election would never be taken for granted. Pollsters would be hired, consultants retained, money would be raised and triangulation begun. Like Bush, the Clintons would delicately appeal to the moderate center, while Hillary would guard the left flank. By 1982, the Clintons were back consolidating their control over Arkansas, appealing to the same kind of voters that elected Reagan, while building their Rolodex among the coastal elites, the big financiers and the establishment left.

In 1992, these two families collided. In a stunning election, the young governor of Arkansas won the presidency by holding the left while appealing to the center with populist themes. The Reagan Democrats and similar independents were ignored, splitting their votes among Bush, Clinton and Ross Perot.

Both families built their power and influence in the 1990s. For the Bush family, it was electing George and Jeb Bush to the governorships of Texas and Florida. For the Clinton family, it was positioning Hillary Clinton for elective office—settling on the senate seat of Daniel Patrick Moynihan in New York. What was common among both families were deep political connections among the donor class, the establishment, Wall Street and big financiers. Though there were differences in approach, both supported big managed trade agreements, liberal immigration laws, pathways to citizenship and globalism. Neither Bushism nor Clintonism had any room for the blue-collar workers dependent on domestic industries. By 2000, George Walker Bush became president and Hillary Clinton became a senator, offices to which both would be reelected.

For those dispossessed by the economy, who lacked the cognitive pedigree to compete in technology, who had no

connections among the elite and who could not claw their way back after the Great Recession, George W. Bush offered nothing. America, including the Reagan Democrats, rejected him in 2006 and again in 2008 with the election of Barack Obama. By 2016, Jeb Bush was humiliated when Republicans overwhelmingly rejected him despite raising over \$100 million from the donor class. Similarly, in this past election, Hillary Clinton was also rejected because she offered nothing to the Reagan Democrats, either. Despite raising tons of money from Wall Street, the politically connected and big technology, Hillary Clinton was defeated, too. In each instance, Donald Trump drove a stake into the hearts of Bushism and Clintonism.

It was the same Reagan Democrats who helped elect Reagan that now gave Donald Trump a presidential victory. The blue-collar workers in places like Trumbull County in Ohio, Erie County in Pennsylvania and Macomb County in Michigan who once came out for Reagan came out in 2016 for Trump. Disgusted by managed trade agreements that picked winners and losers, dynastic politics, the intellectual and financial elite, political correctness, illegal immigration and the condescension of the coastal elites, these voters came out in enough strength to flip states like Ohio, Pennsylvania and Michigan.

1980 was not only the year that Ronald Reagan became president, but also the origins of the Clinton and Bush eras. But as each family grew in power and stature, each lost touch with the economic insecurities of the factory worker, iron worker, mill worker, restaurant server or retail assistant—essential parts of the Reagan coalition. Donald Trump understood those insecurities, capitalized on the tired politics of dynasty, offered hope to those dispossessed from the cognitive economy and gave voice to those over flyover country. For 36 years, the Reagan Democrats flirted with Pat Buchanan, Ross Perot, sometimes voted for a Bush or Clinton, but eventually found their home with Trump.

Now, will Donald Trump return the loyalty? {eo}

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