

Trump's Trajectory Is Unique But Contains Echoes Of The Past

di Julia Azari

Donald Trump's victory has been widely described as shocking, and there's really little precedent for the degree to which Trump's victorious campaign has shaken political norms. But you don't have to look back too far in history to find precedents for different elements of Trump's win, including the sweep and surprise that will reverberate for years. Ronald Reagan's win in 1980 is one example, as we noted in our election night live blog. But there are other examples, too.

We've been up all night, so in that sense, there are some reminders of 2000. Florida was crucial to a Republican victory that year, too, and Hillary Clinton's many Democratic votes in blue states with big cities weren't enough to make a difference in our system, just as they weren't for Al Gore. And in 2000, George W. Bush was ahead in the popular-vote polls fairly consistently, but narrowly — as Clinton was this year. Clinton also looks like she'll end up winning the popular vote and losing the Electoral College — just as Gore did.

Elements of 2004 are evident as well, particularly in the closeness of the race. Then and now, in addition to winning the presidency, the Republicans retained both chambers of Congress (though they appear to have lost a few seats last night). The 2004 comparison warrants some deep thought. First of all, as now, the dominant domestic policy explanation for the result in 2004 was about cultural conflict, not economic distress. And the conduct of foreign policy played an outsized role as well. The biggest issue that year was the war in Iraq and by extension the war on terrorism. In 2004, the bellicose mood that followed the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 remained prevalent. One of the election-night commentators pointed out that Clinton is associated with the wars of the Bush and Obama administrations, and the electorate is tired of those 15 years of war. That's quite a dramatic turnaround in just a few presidential election cycles.

Then there's 1968. Richard Nixon eked out a very narrow popular-vote victory over Hubert Humphrey, but when you combine the support for Nixon with that for George Wallace, the disaffected Democrat who became an independent, law and order won big — and there are echoes of that theme in Trump's campaign. As in our current moment, the electorate was responding to an incumbent Democratic president with an ambitious policy vision and whose leadership represented, in a very different way from Obama, a serious challenge to inherited racial hierarchies. There were big policy changes in both Lyndon Johnson's and Obama's terms — the Great Society and the

Affordable Care Act, for example. But the social change that came out of these presidencies may have been even larger, and the elections that followed boiled down to backlash.

Finally, there's 1932. Stay with me here. If you're a Democrat, I know it hurts to see Franklin Roosevelt compared to Trump. But if the evidence shows us that this is a Republican wave, then we have to take seriously the "mandate for change" narrative. The context is a lot different, of course, but the nature and concept of democracy in the U. S. were in question during the Great Depression — there were even calls for martial law. Eventually, a government strong enough to do something about the situation began to emerge. One possible interpretation of Trump's victory is that, in the eyes of some voters, a similar crisis is present now.

So the outcome of this year's election is a new combination of some familiar elements. Last-minute surprises and thin-but-wide party victories are things we've seen before. Panic about candidates' ideologies and qualifications isn't new either. But Trump remains a unique candidate as far as his lack of conventional credentials, his campaign conduct, and his pursuit of the nomination despite his lack of a history with the party. In other words, elections have a lot of uncertainty, and they can deliver surprises and mixed results. But until now, our parties have generally ensured that the candidates they nominated fit a certain politician-like mold. For an election, and a candidate like this, there's no precise precedent.