

Republican realignments

By [Jason Jewell](#)

March 8, 2016

It was the evening of Super Tuesday, and my social media feeds were filling with expressions of shocked incredulity.

“How is this possible?! Has the world gone completely mad?”

“The movie *Idiocracy* is starting to look more and more like a documentary.”

“The Pied Piper lives again!”

Donald Trump has defied expectations since the moment he announced his candidacy for president. Washington observers assured us of a “ceiling to his support” among primary voters; it has been repeatedly smashed. Ever-increasing numbers of Republicans have decided to embrace his anti-establishment message, or at least to vote for him as the least-bad candidate standing.

The establishment-approved Republican candidates, by contrast, have done extremely poorly, especially considering the amount of money they have spent. By the time he dropped out of the race last month, Jeb Bush had spent around \$60 million to win [2.8 percent of the vote in Iowa](#), [11 percent in New Hampshire](#), and [7.9 percent in South Carolina](#).

Now the same pundits who dismissed Trump last summer are in full-blown panic mode, constructing ever-more-unlikely scenarios in the hopes of preventing the celebrity from getting the GOP nomination. Consider David Brooks’s March 8 column, titled “[It’s Not Too Late!](#)” Brooks, a self-described “[recovering secularist](#),” prays for a “Rubio miracle” in Florida and a Kasich victory in Ohio, along with an all-out #NeverTrump campaign that also stalls Ted Cruz’s attempt to set himself up as the obvious alternative to Trump. When all those pieces fall into place, a brokered convention could find a “broadly acceptable new option” for the nomination.

Brooks may be grasping at straws, but he goes on to make an important point about the potential for an historic realignment in the Republican Party.

The last time such a realignment occurred was in the 1960s and 1970s. The so-called “Me Too” Republicans differed very little from their Democratic counterparts ideologically. Both espoused a can-do liberalism that placed great trust in the state’s ability to regulate the economy and provide education and a social safety net. These Rockefeller Republicans faced a severe challenge in the 1964 presidential primary campaign in the form of Arizona senator Barry Goldwater.

The Goldwater campaign was the political coming-out event for the “New Conservatives” represented by publications like the *National Review*. Phyllis Schlafly’s *A Choice, Not an Echo* described how Rockefeller Republicans had worked for many years to ensure the victory of candidates from the party’s left wing by manipulating the nomination process. Goldwater staked out clear, stark differences between himself and his establishment opponents on taxes, welfare programs, and civil rights legislation, among other things.

The Rockefeller Republicans, having lost the fight for the nomination, mostly withheld support from Goldwater during the general election campaign, and President Lyndon Johnson handily defeated him. Nevertheless, from that point on, the Republican rank and file increasingly turned their backs on the party’s liberal elite. By the 1980s, Republican candidates in most parts of the country at least had to pay lip service to conservative ideas in order to gain support.

This election cycle, Republican elites have once again lost the trust of their party’s base. On top of that, [more Americans than ever before feel alienated from the two major parties](#). Along comes a candidate who promises to “shake things up” and “fight for” people who feel as though they’ve been on the losing side of cultural, economic, and demographic changes.

Should we be surprised to see such promises resonate? [Trump polls best in areas where middle-aged white people are dying the fastest](#). Many believe the political system has failed them, and they seem willing to take a chance that Trump, whatever else he might do, at least won’t make things worse for them. (If this mentality seems unfathomable to you, try taking [this quiz](#) to see how well you relate to this population’s concerns.)

At this point, it seems as though there are three conceivable outcomes. The least likely is that somehow the Republican establishment will regain control of the party at a brokered convention without driving out a sizable percentage of its base. A

reluctant establishment endorsement of Ted Cruz could accomplish this.

Another possible outcome is that the GOP will realign in a more populist direction and more openly represent the interests of its base. This second scenario could result in the defection of many elites, particularly neoconservatives like [Bill Kristol](#).

The third potential outcome is that what looks to the base like an underhanded attempt to deny Trump the nomination and [nominate an establishment candidate](#) like Mitt Romney will result in a walkout that could end the GOP as we know it. If that happens, it would be the first death of a major U.S. political party in more than 150 years.

Now *that* would be interesting.

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