



How Donald Trump Broke the Republican Party — and Political Science

By Taegan Goddard, Publisher of [Political Wire](#)

In the 1970s, smoke-filled back rooms were replaced by primaries and caucuses as the method for choosing presidential nominees. The Democrats kicked off the process after a chaotic and violent convention in 1968 and the Republicans soon followed.

But these reforms were more of an illusion. One of the most influential political science books of the last decade — [The Party Decides](#), which came out in 2008 — argued that political parties still called the shots.

The book coined the phrase “[invisible primary](#)” to describe how candidates wooed various parts of the party establishment in their efforts to secure the nomination.

Why was this necessary? Political parties still provided the “stuff” needed to break through — fundraising, voter lists, policy platforms and, most important, legitimacy.

But Donald Trump didn’t need any of it.

- He was hated by the party establishment and actively ran against the Republican party.
- He challenged much of the Republican party’s core ideology.
- He called the two former presidential nominees — Mitt Romney and John McCain “pathetic losers” and he said that the last Republican in the Oval Office, George W. Bush, was a “failed president.”

Even Sen. Ted Cruz’s candidacy — a man who is widely recognized as the most hated U.S. senator by his colleagues — rattled the thesis of the book by being the runner-up in the primaries.

The Republican party seemingly had no control over the primary process.

What changed since 2008 when this book was published?

We got a hint during the Obama campaign four years ago.

In 2012, Barack Obama caught GOP challenger Mitt Romney by surprise. While the television airwaves were filled with thousands of negative campaign ads, Obama was waging a very different campaign on Facebook.

In 2007 and 2008, Facebook was still ramping up. But by 2012, the Obama campaign found it connected nearly every young voter.

The Obama team realized that reaching the young voters critical to his re-election would be nearly impossible through traditional robocalls because most young people don't have landlines and it's was against the law to call their cell phones. But the Obama campaign could reach nearly all of the young people in America through Facebook.

Democratic strategists also realized that Romney had a minimal presence on Facebook, so they could run a mostly positive campaign about Obama with very little competition from their opponent.

I was an observer at a post-election conference at Harvard. Top Obama campaign officials were on one side of the conference table and top Romney officials were on the other side. After the Obama campaign described what they had done — the Romney campaign at this point still didn't understand what had happened — one Romney staffer leaned back in his chair and said in amazement, "They were running a completely different campaign than us."

While the political parties once provided the infrastructure necessary for candidates seeking their party's nomination, Facebook, Twitter and social media allow a direct connection with voters. It's now very easy for factions both within and outside the party to coordinate on their own.

By 2016, technology strategist [Ben Thompson](#) notes that social media evolved even further:

1. All news sources are now competing on an equal footing.

Those controlled by the party — even outlets like Fox News or the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page — are no longer as influential. Donald Trump waged constant battles with both Fox News and the Wall Street Journal during the primary season.

In fact, most people got their news about the presidential campaign in their timelines next to pictures of their sister's kids or a funny cat video. Real news even had to compete with fake news.

2. The likelihood that a political message resonates is not based who is saying it but on how many voters are receptive to hearing it.

You know that Facebook "like" button that has popped up all over the Internet? It is recording your preferences on every issue. When you "like" an article about Donald Trump building a wall on the Mexican border, Facebook knows it should send you more of those articles.

This means that candidates are now talking directly to voters. They don't need to do it through parties or news organizations any more. The most successful politicians are not those who serve the party but rather those who tell voters what they most want to hear.

Donald Trump was the first presidential candidate to recognize this. In doing so, he changed the rules of politics.